

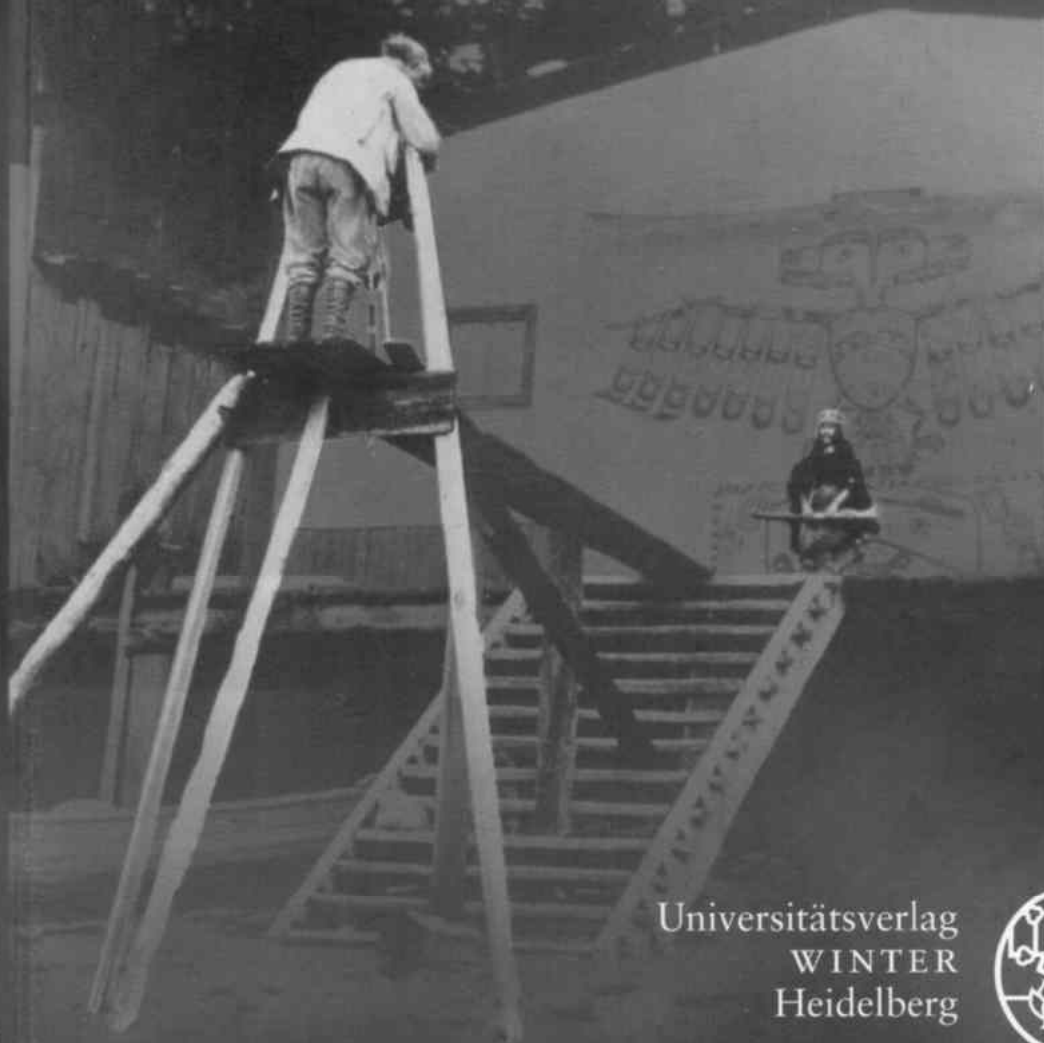
ULLA HASELSTEIN
BERNDT OSTENDORF
PETER SCHNECK Editors

Iconographies of Power

The Politics
and Poetics
of Visual Representation

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

Volume 108



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HASELSTEIN · OSTENDORF · SCHNECK (Eds.)
Iconographies of Power

Today the question of iconography has taken on a new and more general urgency. As a dominant cultural practice, iconography embraces the politics as well as the poetics of visual representation within specific historical and cultural conditions. In its contemporary significance iconography increasingly challenges disciplinary boundaries and conventional definitions and interpretations of the relation between words and images asking us to critically compare and contrast different iconographies as distinct cultural practices of power.

In their specific arguments and approaches, the essays collected in this volume all share a similar concern with the iconographical power and poetics of the image across a broad range of visual representations: prints and illustrations, painting, sculpture and concept art, documentary and art photography, film comedy and digital imagery. In all instances, the image is looked at not as an exclusive and isolated phenomenon but, rather emphatically, as a visual and contextual event; as both the source and target of the collision and the collusion of word and image; as instances and symptoms of contemporary iconographic practice alike.

With contributions by Winfried Fluck, Mario Klarer, Mick Gidley, Douglas Tallack, Heinz Ickstadt, Peter Schneck, Maren Stange, Hanne Loreck, Zsófia Bán, Susanne v. Falkenhausen, Deniz Göktürk, Wendy Steiner, Hanjo Berressem, Kaja Silverman, Michael Wetzell.

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REINHARD R. DOERRIES
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Contents

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| BERNDT OSTENDORF ULLA HASELSTEIN PETER SCHNECK | Iconographies of Power: The Politics and Poetics of Visual Representation | 7 |
|--|--|---|

| | | |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|----|
| WINFRIED FLUCK | Aesthetic Experience of the Image | 11 |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|----|

Looking Forward: 19th Century Projects

| | | |
|--------------|---|----|
| MARIO KLARER | Before Ornament was a Crime: Nineteenth Century Pattern Design | 45 |
|--------------|---|----|

| | | |
|-------------|--|----|
| MICK GIDLEY | Edward S. Curtis' Photographs for <i>The North American Indian</i> : Texts and Contexts | 65 |
|-------------|--|----|

| | | |
|-----------------|--|----|
| DOUGLAS TALLACK | Painting the El: Visual Representations of the New York Elevated Railroad, 1890s-1930s | 87 |
|-----------------|--|----|

Projecting Images: Modernist Iconologies

| | | |
|----------------|---|-----|
| HEINZ ICKSTADT | A Literature of the Eye: The Image and the Moving Image in Modern American Literature | 111 |
|----------------|---|-----|

| | | |
|---------------|--|-----|
| PETER SCHNECK | The Purity of Poverty: Walker Evans and Iconographic Autonomy | 131 |
|---------------|--|-----|

| | | |
|--------------|--|-----|
| MAREN STANGE | "Not What We Seem": Image and Text in 12 Million Black Voices | 173 |
|--------------|--|-----|

| | | |
|---------------|--|-----|
| DENIZ GÖKTÜRK | Strangers in Disguise: Role Play Beyond Identity Politics in Anarchic Film Comedy | 187 |
|---------------|--|-----|

Transfer/Images: Trauma, Memory, History

| | | |
|----------------|--|-----|
| KAJA SILVERMAN | The Cure by Love | 215 |
| HANJO BERESSEM | Crash: ". . . at an indeterminate moment, indeterminate places . . . " | 237 |
| ZSÓFIA BÁN | The Translation of Art: Reinterpreting the Work of Joseph Kosuth | 269 |

Transgressive Visions: Bodies and Boundaries

| | | |
|-----------------------------|--|-----|
| SUSANNE VON FALKENHAUSEN | The Body of Abstraction: The Politics of Visual Representation in Postwar American Art | 283 |
| MICHAEL WETZEL | American Appropriationists and the Lolita Complex | 299 |
| HANNE LORECK | Cindy Sherman's Sex Pictures, Pornography, and the Real | 317 |
| WENDY STEINER | The Necessity of Pornography | 335 |
| | List of Contributors | 345 |

BERNDT OSTENDORF, ULLA HASELSTEIN, PETER SCHNECK

Iconographies of Power: An Introductory Statement

In the late age of print, there seems to be no way to escape the power of the image. Enhanced by ever more sophisticated technologies, produced and distributed in prodigious quantities by global media networks, aimed at their postmodern audiences' insatiable appetite for pictures, images have become the basic currency for all forms of political, social, and cultural practices presumably driving the written and the spoken word out of circulation.

This simple opposition of words against images often conceals the far more complex and dynamic interplay between visual and verbal modes of representation within any given cultural and historical situation. In fact, what we are experiencing today is both a basic challenge and an increasing revision of most of our conventional concepts about the relation between words and images. The power of images today no longer rests on their transparency to perception, their immediate relation to "optical truth," or their dependable reference to "objective facts." Yet neither does the suggestive eloquence of visual representations present an autonomous language in itself. Quite to the contrary, the power of images is realized foremost in the stories we allow or do not allow them to tell, through the histories we make them proclaim or deny, and, finally, through the theoretical concepts and discourses which we use in order to contain, regulate or liberate their force of signification. Words and images are thus always engaged within a complex system of conflicting or corresponding iconographies of empowerment and disempowerment.

It is this dialectics of empowerment and disempowerment which has been the most decisive aspect in the development of visual culture over the last two centuries. What has been variously termed the society of the spec-

tacle or the culture of performance has its roots in the rise of visual representation during the nineteenth century. From its unprecedented production and distribution in magazines and prints, to the introduction of photography and film, and finally television, the image has emerged not only as the dominant means of communication and representation but also as a basic medium for the construction of collective reality and individual identity in a global visual culture. With the advent of the new digital media, the power of the image as a master medium to construct "identities" and "realities" has become even more compelling.

The power of images today also results from their increasing elusiveness: as an ubiquitous agent of cultural representation it refuses to be mastered by discursive means. The image confuses as much as it (re-)organizes discursive boundaries in the definition, prescription and categorization of both identity and reality. This is why the artistic practices of the avant-garde, for instance, with their insistence on the materiality of the image could become crucial for the development of a critical discourse on visual rhetorics and poetics.

Thus the question of iconography today has taken on a new and more general urgency: What do we make images do when we make them talk? This question embraces the politics as well as the poetics of visual representation and their specific historical and cultural conditions. What happens to the concept of history, for instance, when images—more suggestive and apparently less reliable than words—take precedence over written documents and records? How do we conceive of a cultural memory which more and more makes recourse to and at the same time seems haunted by images? What sense do terms like "mimesis" and "evidence" and the philosophical and legal discourses based on them respectively make in a culture completely devoted to performance and spectacle? What governs the status of visual representations between conflicting discourses of consumption, ritual, and mythology—what role does language play in the trivialization, canonization, and lastly, in the evaluation of images?

Finally, it may not be an accident that the interest in the discursive foundations of iconographic practices and the cultural presence and power

of images has been exceptionally strong in the United States. On the one hand, from colonial times on images played a indispensable part in the inception of American culture and identity. On the other hand, American cultural identity could only come to its own by the constant revision and re-translation of continental iconographic traditions, as well as by the continuing efforts at homogenizing and synthesizing its own extremely hybrid cultural imagery and iconographic practices. In the process, the image culture of the United States has turned out very powerful icons, immediately recognizable all over the world, as it has produced, and continues to produce, iconographic forms and formats, from film to television to digital imagery, that have become part and parcel of a global visual culture.

In their distinct arguments and from different perspectives, the essays collected in this volume are all similarly concerned with the iconographic power and the poetics of the image—not as an exclusive and isolated phenomenon but, rather emphatically, as a visual and contextual event, as both the source and target of the collision and the collusion of word and image; as instances and symptoms of contemporary iconographic practice alike. The power of the image today may as well be grounded in the dazzling diversity of its iconographic configurations and interpretations.

The idea for this book goes back to the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Amerika-Institut at the Ludwig-Maximilians Universität, Munich, in 1999. The essays presented here have been originally inspired by the international conference "Iconographies of Power" occasioned by the anniversary, and the editors have therefore decided to keep the title for the collection. We would like to thank all contributors for their intense interest and great patience invested in the original project and in the final product. We are especially grateful to Oya Ataman for assembling and organizing the final manuscript. Finally, we wish to thank the U.S. Consulate General in Munich for sustained support and for making this publication possible.

WINFRIED FLUCK

Aesthetic Experience of the Image

The question of aesthetic experience stands at the center of the field of literary and cultural studies. We do not study literary texts and cultural objects primarily for their referential function, that is, as sources of documentation or information. Rather, we are drawn to them because they provide an experience and have an impact on us or others. Even where texts are used for the purpose of cultural criticism, as is often the case in contemporary criticism, these cultural critics often forget that the texts they deal with have assumed their cultural significance only through their impact as aesthetic objects.

It thus remains one of the central challenges for literary and cultural studies to clarify in what way we can talk about the dimension of the encounter with cultural material that is called aesthetic experience. One of the striking shortcomings of current cultural criticism is that, as a rule, there is little interest in taking up the question of aesthetics, because the aesthetic dimension is seen as mere evasion of history, politics or the project of a cultural criticism. However, the aesthetic dimension is not the more or less decorative wrapping of a real meaning to which we ought to penetrate as quickly as possible. The term aesthetic denotes a distinct mode of communication and experience without which we would have no object in literary and cultural studies and no good reason for the existence of a separate field of study. In the following essay I therefore want to take up the question of aesthetic experience again and discuss it in two parts. The first part addresses the question of what it actually means to have an aesthetic experience—a question that many people in the field today find difficult to answer. In the second part, I apply these considerations to a discussion of the aesthetic experience of the image.

I

Because of the language-and-text centeredness of philosophy and literary theory in the 20th century, the issue of aesthetic experience has not been a question of central concern in these fields. One notable exception is John Dewey's *Art as Experience* which Peter Hansen, in James Kloppenberg's recently published *Companion to American Thought*, calls "the most complete American aesthetic theory developed in the twentieth century" (18). Indeed, in reading *Art and Experience* today, one is struck to see in how many ways Dewey anticipated positions and developments in literary and cultural studies that became influential only in the 1960s or even more recently. The first chapter of Raymond Williams's seminal book *The Long Revolution*, for example, which is one of the founding texts of the cultural studies movement, is based largely on arguments first developed in Dewey's *Art and Experience* in which Dewey claims that aesthetic experience is not tied to the encounter with a beautiful object but emerges from an intensified experience of qualities that characterize everyday objects, so that aesthetic experience is something we encounter as ever-present potential in our life-world.

The major achievement of Dewey's aesthetics consists in the revision of traditional aesthetics from a substantialist aesthetics to an experiential one in which the aesthetic is no longer defined as intrinsic quality of an object but as a specific experience with that object.¹ In Dewey's view, the aesthetic is constituted by an attitude which we take toward an object. The argument has become familiar to us through the Czech structuralist Jan Mukařovský who argued in his essay on aesthetic function, norms and aesthetic value that any object of the life-world can, in principle, be approached (and interpreted) from a variety of perspectives which Mukařovský calls referential, pragmatic (by which he means practical uses) and aesthetic. A building or a dress serve primarily a practical function. But, at the same time, we can also look at them as aesthetic objects

¹ For a detailed analysis of the issues discussed in part 1 of this essay, see my analysis of Dewey in "John Dewey's Ästhetik und die Literaturtheorie der Gegenwart."

and we might even reflect upon the possible relations between these two aspects. This argument, however, can already be found in *Art as Experience* (published in 1934, while Mukařovsky's essay came out in 1936) in which Dewey illustrates the point by the example of a group of people approaching the Manhattan skyline on a ferry:

Some men regard it as simply a journey to get them where they want to be—a means to be endured. So, perhaps, they read a newspaper. One who is idle may glance at this and that building identifying it as the Metropolitan Tower, the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and so on. Another, impatient to arrive, may be on the lookout for landmarks by which to judge progress toward his destination. Still another, who is taking the journey for the first time, looks eagerly but is bewildered by the multiplicity of objects spread out to view. He sees neither the whole nor the parts; he is like a layman who goes into an unfamiliar factory where many machines are plying. Another person, interested in real estate, may see, in looking at the skyline, evidence in the height of buildings, of the value of land. Or he may let his thoughts roam to the congestion of a great industrial and commercial centre. He may go on to think of the planlessness of arrangement as evidence of the chaos of a society organized on the basis of conflict rather than cooperation. Finally the scene formed by the buildings may be looked at as colored and lighted volumes in relation to one another, to the sky and to the river. He is now seeing aesthetically, as a painter might see. (140)

All of these different observers see the same object but only a certain attitude turns the Manhattan skyline into an aesthetic object and provides the basis for an aesthetic experience.

This argument was more systematically developed by Mukařovský who, in turn, was rediscovered in the 1960s by the Constance school of reception aesthetics. Reception aesthetics is one of the few of the so-called Continental theories of the recent theory boom in literary and cultural studies in which the name Dewey remains an important point of reference. Hans Robert Jauß, for example, calls *Art as Experience* "a pioneering achievement in analyzing aesthetic experience" in his book *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik (Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics)*. Similarly, Wolfgang Iser, in his study *The Act of Reading*, uses Dewey's *Art as Experience* as a welcome confirmation of the fact that the meaning and significance of a literary text is realized only in the interplay between the structures of the literary text and their actualiza-

tion in the act of reading. However, he then parts company with Dewey by emphasizing the discrepancies produced by the reader during the gestalt-forming process, because, for Iser, these experiences of discrepancy are an important source for transcending the reader's previous range of orientation:

It is at this point that the discrepancies produced by the reader during the gestalt-forming process take on their true significance. They have the effect of enabling the reader actually to become aware of the inadequacy of the gestalten he has produced, so that he may detach himself from his own participation in the text and see himself guided from without. (133-34)

Dewey's *Art as Experience* thus serves reception aesthetics as a convenient point of departure for stressing the experiential dimension of our encounter with literature against mimetic theories of literature. On the other hand, Dewey's "pioneering achievement" is considered a crude forerunner for an approach that has described the process of reception in far greater detail by focusing on concepts such as the implied reader or the meaning-generating function of a text's constitutive blanks. In terms of actual usefulness, Dewey thus remains marginal in reception aesthetics as well.

Jauß provides a reason for the surprising neglect of Dewey in literary and cultural studies when he claims that for Dewey notions of Aristotelean unity remain the necessary condition for aesthetic experience.² We are here, it seems to me, at the heart of the problem contemporary literary and cultural theory has had with Dewey's aesthetics. The problem lies in Dewey's latent organicism. To be sure, Dewey does not conceive of the work of art as a closed structure in the sense of the New Criticism in which the pressures of the literary context transform the ordinary linguistic material into an autonomous and self-referential object. Instead, Dewey emphasizes the processual character of all experience, including aesthetic

² "In dem Maße, wie Dewey den Blick auf das Ästhetische außerhalb der Kunst eröffnet und seinen Bereich beschreibt, als ob er sich unbegrenzt erweitern lasse, werden unvermerkt klassizistische Bestimmungen des Kunstschönen wie Ordnung, Form, Harmonie zu Eigenschaften einer ästhetisierten Dingwelt umgemünzt und aristotelische Bestimmungen der Einheit der epischen Fabel zur Bedingung der Möglichkeit von Erfahrung überhaupt." (Jauß 162-63)

experience. Still, he faces the problem that he has to distinguish aesthetic experience from other forms of experience and to mark it as a distinct and unique form of experience. The fact that Dewey draws on organicist vocabulary in order to describe the distinctiveness and uniqueness of aesthetic experience reflects, in my view, not an organicist conviction on Dewey's part but a problem arising from his own insistence on the continuity between everyday experience and aesthetic experience. As a heightened, enhanced sense of ordinary experience, art functions as "development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience" (53).³ Art gives unity to an experience not yet sufficiently clarified and coherent. Hence, the confirmation of wholeness must be the goal of interpretation: "analysis is disclosure of parts as parts of a whole" (314).

Still, the matter is more complicated than it may look at first sight. Richard Shusterman has reminded us in his book on *Pragmatist Aesthetics* that for Dewey aesthetic experience is not merely constituted by the perception of wholeness but by an experience of tension, a rhythm of conflict and adaptation: "The factor of resistance is worth especial notice at this point. Without internal tension there would be a fluid rush to a straightway mark; there would be nothing that could be called development and fulfillment" (143). It is thus not the gestalt perception of wholeness itself but the experience of development and growth generated by it which stands at the center of aesthetic experience for Dewey.

However, even if one grants that, at a closer look, Dewey's idea of wholeness is really that of a rhythmic processing of tension, resistance, and adaptation, it seems hard to deny the tacit normative dimension in this conceptualization of aesthetic experience: if there is tension, it is crucial that the experience and enactment of this experience follows a certain sequence or rhythm and that the conflicting elements are finally brought together and 'consummated':

³ Dewey adds: "This fact I take to be the only secure basis upon which esthetic theory can be built" (53).

There is an element of passion in all esthetic perception. Yet when we are overwhelmed by passion, as in extreme rage, fear, jealousy, the experience is definitely non-esthetic. . . The material of the experience lacks elements of balance and proportion. (55)

There clearly is an ideal of successful integration at work here that lies at the bottom of Dewey's view of aesthetic experience. In fact, there has to be. If aesthetic experience clarifies ordinary experience, then one has to be able to recognize it as such, and since all experience is characterized by processes of resistance and adaptation, doing and undergoing, there must be a criterion of intensity or successful integration in order to distinguish aesthetic experience from other experiences. The case can be illustrated by going back to the example of the Manhattan skyline where mere multiplicity leads to confusion:

Still another [man], who is taking the journey for the first time, looks eagerly but is bewildered by the multiplicity of objects spread out to view. He *sees* neither the whole nor the parts; he is like a layman who goes into an unfamiliar factory where many machines are plying. (140)

In contrast, the object becomes an aesthetic object when the observer sees the single aspects in relation to one another, to the sky and to the river: "He is now seeing aesthetically, as a painter might see" (140). For this second observer, the single parts cohere and form an image which provides the basis for an aesthetic experience.⁴

⁴ For Dewey, the successful integration of parts can become a metaphor for the successful integration of the individual into society: "A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. . . . This whole is then felt as an expansion of ourselves. For only one frustrated in a particular object of desire upon which he had staked himself, like Macbeth, finds that life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Where egotism is not made the measure of reality and value, we are citizens of this vast world beyond ourselves, and any intense realization of its presence with and in us brings a peculiarly satisfying sense of unity in itself and with ourselves" (199).

II

In contrast to Dewey's vision of identity and successful integration, almost all approaches in contemporary literary and cultural studies, including the various forms of negative aesthetics that we have, are based on the idea of non-identity. In the current cultural radicalism, this non-identity is attributed to elements such as writing, rhetoric or representation,⁵ whereas Iser considers the fictional dimension of the literary text or aesthetic object as the primary source of non-identity. He therefore links the concept of the aesthetic with that of fictionality in order to describe the specific nature of aesthetic experience. In Iser's version, aesthetic experience is no longer attributed to the intensity and unity of experience but to "the doubling structure of fictionality" (*Prospecting* 236). Since fiction is an invention, it brings something into the world that does not yet exist in this particular form. Although fiction makes use of existing forms of the life-world for the purpose of representation, it thus cannot be identical with reality.

When a text or an object is considered as fiction, we cannot regard the object simply in referential terms, because in reading a fictional text, even a realistic novel, reality is created anew. Since we have never met a character named Huck Finn and do in fact know that he never existed, we have to come up with our own mental image of him. Inevitably, this mental construct will draw on our own feelings and associations, or, to use a broader, more comprehensive term, our imaginary. These imaginary elements can only gain a *gestalt*, however, if they are connected with discourses of the real. Thus, a fictive character like Huck Finn emerges as combination of a bad boy-discourse and our imaginary additions to it.⁶ If it weren't for the bad boy-discourse, there would be no reference and hence no object that

⁵ For an analysis of the dominant themes and arguments of the current cultural radicalism, cf. my analysis in "The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism."

⁶ In his entry on "representation" in the critical handbook *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, W.J.T. Mitchell speaks of "the complex interaction between playful fantasy and serious reality in all forms of representation" (12).

can be commonly shared and discussed, while, on the other hand, the imaginary elements are the reason for the puzzling and often frustrating phenomenon that we can come up with ever new interpretations of one and the same aesthetic object—interpretations that are, in fact, not only different from those of other critics but also from our own prior readings.

As Iser has argued, literary representation is not a form of mimesis but a performative act. The double reference of fiction creates an object that is never stable and identical with itself. And it is this non-identity that can be seen as an important source of aesthetic experience, because it allows us to do two things at the same time: to articulate imaginary elements and to look at them from the outside with a certain amount of distance. As a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are, in Iser's words, "both ourselves and someone else at the same time":

In this respect the required activity of the recipient resembles that of an actor, who in order to perform his role must use his thoughts, his feelings, and even his body as an analogue for representing something he is not. In order to produce the determinate form of an unreal character, the actor must allow his own reality to fade out. At the same time, however, he does not know precisely who, say, Hamlet is, for one cannot properly identify a character who has never existed. Thus role-playing endows a figment with a sense of reality in spite of its impenetrability which defies total determination. . . . Staging oneself as someone else is a source of aesthetic pleasure; it is also the means whereby representation is transferred from text to reader." (*Prospecting* 244)

Staging oneself as somebody else, so that we are ourselves and yet also another person at the same time: the theoretical challenge that arises from this description of aesthetic experience is how we can talk about that part which we bring to the transfer between aesthetic object and recipient. Iser solves the problem by the assumption of an anthropological lack, a search for origins, which allows him to talk about the recipient in terms of universal human needs and to remain on the level of such abstract concepts as the indeterminacy of human existence or the insurmountable finiteness of man.⁷

⁷ For a closer analysis of Iser's work, see my essay "Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in the Literary Theory of Wolfgang Iser."

However, are all our aesthetic experiences reenacting the same search for knowledge of an inaccessible origin or end? Even if this were the case, this diffuse longing for self-awareness is obviously articulated in historically, culturally, and psychologically different and diverse ways—as the reception history of any art object or fictional text easily demonstrates. In order to address this subjective dimension, Gabriele Schwab has tried to address the question of emotional and psychological subject-structures more concretely in her book *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen. Otherness in Literary Language*. Schwab, too, takes her point of departure from a "double movement" of the reader:

If we understand readings as a negotiation across cultural and historical boundaries and a form of making contact with otherness, then we perceive a double movement toward the culture of the text/play and back to the culture of the reader. As readers of Shakespeare, for example, we usually do not try to become a Elizabethan . . . , but rather to encounter in the otherness of Elizabethan culture something to which we respond and may import into our own culture or our own selves. (4-5)⁸

Why and how do we respond to Shakespeare's plays? Schwab tries to provide an answer by replacing the Iserian model of a transfer between text and reader with the psychoanalytical notion of transference. By doing so, her theory of reading as a form of cultural contact can point to psychic and emotional dimensions that are certainly part of any aesthetic experience. Iser describes our encounter with an aesthetic object as a cognitive and ideational activity. In contrast, Schwab wants to take into account our—often strong—emotional involvement by describing reading as an act of transference of the internal otherness of the unconscious. Whatever is repressed from consciousness will be perceived as other and will thus

⁸ See also Schwab's description of the tension between otherness and familiarity in the reading process: "In general, changes are often provoked by encounters with otherness that challenge familiar assumptions or open up new perspectives. Literature, however, requires a specific dynamic between familiarity and otherness, or closeness and distance, in order to affect readers. The old cliché that we 'find ourselves' in literature refers to the fact that unless literature resonates with us we remain cold to it.

determine our relation to the otherness of the aesthetic object. How can we talk about this dimension, however, since it appears to be a highly individual, idiosyncratic dimension of the interiority of a person that is hidden from view even to the person itself?

Schwab's answer consists in a generalization that characterizes much of the current cultural radicalism: the projection of "internal otherness" into whole cultures, nations, or groups.⁹ Since we are part of the same culture or subculture, we are linked to the writer or to other readers by the same configuration and phantasms of internal otherness. But, again, this raises the question of the individual dimension of the reception process. Although we may be formed, or rather: deformed, by similar configurations of a socially or culturally produced internal otherness, we nevertheless come up with surprisingly different and varied experiences and interpretations of one and the same text or object.¹⁰ No matter how effective the configuration of a subject-position may be in a fictive text: because of the non-identity of the fictional world and the ensuing need to bring it to life through a mental construct of our own, there always exists an individual difference in realization and, hence, in aesthetic experience.¹¹

On the other hand, complete familiarity would never engage our interest but leave us equally indifferent" (*Mirror* 10).

⁹ This attempt to account for a subjective dimension in aesthetic experience in terms of a collective psychic structure is even more obvious in Schwab's essay "Literary Transcendence and the Vicissitudes of Culture," where she first speaks of a "structural unconscious" (124) and then of a "cultural unconscious" (125) which is used, as she finally points out in a footnote, "as a cultural equivalent of Jameson's notion of the political unconscious" (138n).

¹⁰ In response to recent theories in which the reader or spectator is conceptualized as an effect of discursive regimes, Appleyard thus maintains: "Against this objection I would argue that although the culture and its system of meaning are certainly prior to the reader in a historical and epistemological sense, nonetheless the construction of any particular meaning (and hence the incremental restructuring of the culture) requires an interaction between an individual reader and the culture" (15-16).

¹¹ This is not to reject analyses of aesthetic objects in terms of internal otherness but to point to their limits. Clearly, in constructing imaginary worlds, we draw on an existent cultural imaginary but this cannot fully explain the meaning such images or stereotypes hold for the individual reader and the function they have for him or her.

What is the source of this difference and how can it be described? So far, my argument has been that, as a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, literary representation—here taken as model for other aesthetic objects as well—can be seen as a performative act. By representing reality in a fictional mode, the literary text restructures reality so that certain elements are bracketed and others foregrounded. This act is repeated by the recipient in the act of reception. In this reception, the recipient produces a second narrative that constitutes, in fact, a second text. Mark Twain faced the problem of racial relations and one of his responses was to redefine the issue in terms of the moral struggle in chapter 31 of his novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Lionel Trilling in turn experienced this scene as especially meaningful, because he saw it in (and transformed it into) categories that reflected his own struggle for independence against a Stalinist Left.¹² Such a redescription should not be seen as solipsism, however. On the contrary, it is the beginning of an act of articulation that makes Trilling's experiences intersubjectively accessible. The prospect that other texts can enable us to articulate and authorize our own need for articulation drives us back, again and again, to fictional material. It also makes us interpret and redescribe these texts again and again in order to assess how plausible the analogue is and whether it can be shared.

III

As I have argued so far, aesthetic experience is generated by two steps: 1) An aesthetic object is created by taking a certain attitude toward the object in which its non-identity is foregrounded; 2) This non-identity, in turn, creates the necessity of a transfer that becomes the basis for articulating otherwise inexpressible dimensions of the self and permits us to stage ourselves as somebody else, so that we can be ourselves and another person at the same time. In this way, hitherto inarticulated imaginary elements can gain a gestalt and open themselves up for inspection. However, can this expla-

¹² For a convincing analysis of Trilling's reading of *Huck Finn*, see Arac.

nation also be applied to our perception and experience of an image, since the model is based on the necessity to mentally construct an object which pictorial representation does not seem to require? It is at this point that we have to distinguish between two forms of images: mental constructs, for example of the literary character Huck Finn, and pictures. The image as mental construct plays an important part in aesthetic experience because it is crucial for making the letters on the page come to life. A picture appears to displace such a mental activity by mere optical perception, as Iser points out in *The Act of Reading*:

The image, then, is basic to ideation. It relates to the nongiven or to the absent, endowing it with presence. It is not a piece of mental equipment in consciousness but a way in which consciousness opens itself to the object, prefiguring it from deep within itself as a function of its implicit knowledge. This strange quality of the image becomes apparent when, for instance, one sees the film version of a novel one has read. Here we have optical perception which takes place against the background of our own remembered images. As often as not, the spontaneous reaction is one of disappointment, because the characters somehow fail to live up to the image we had created of them while reading. However much this image may vary from individual to individual, the reaction: 'That's not how I imagined him' is a general one and reflects the special nature of the image. The difference between the two types of picture is that the film is optical and presents a given object, whereas the imagination remains unfettered. Objects, unlike imaginings, are highly determinate, and it is this determinacy which makes us feel disappointed. (137-38)

Iser's contrast of the indeterminacy of literary representation with the determinacy of film appears plausible as soon as we distinguish between the image as mental construct and the image as pictorial representation. On the basis of this distinction, Iser's claim that determinacy undermines aesthetic experience seems to make sense insofar as the picture precedes mental construction: before we can start a mental construction we have already seen the image we are supposed to construct. But what do we actually see when we look at pictures? Gestalt theory and, more recently, constructivism have refuted naive empiricist notions of perception as the mere transfer of sense impressions. In order to make any sense of what we see, in fact, in order to register an object as object, our perception has to have a focus that gives structure to the object. Landscape painting provides an

obvious example. Not every piece of nature is a landscape. Rather, in order to qualify as landscape, certain iconographic and cultural object criteria have to be fulfilled. In other words, we do not first register and then interpret what we see. Quite on the contrary, we already interpret what we see in the act of registering it.

Where does the model come from that is at work in this registering-as-interpretation? In cognition theory, schemata help us to order a bewildering array of sense impressions, so that what we are transferring to the image is a set of cognitive structures that successfully affirm their functionality as classifying schemata: "To recognize an object or event is to possess a schema for it and to have a procedure for judging it a member of some class" (Bordwell 146). In his book *Making Meaning*, Bordwell refines this model by claiming that meaning is created by the projection of semantic structures onto an object. However, theories of cognition and picture comprehension can only explain why pictures are intelligible, not why they might provide an aesthetic experience. To be sure, picture comprehension depends on the recognition of the iconic dimension of the sign, but recognition is not yet the same as meaning making and certainly not identical with aesthetic experience. Hence, Vivian Sobchak claims, vision is meaningless, "if we regard it only in its objective modality as visibility" (290). We must acknowledge subjective experience and the invisible as part of our vision—that part which does not "appear" to us, "but which grounds vision and gives the visible within it a substantial thickness and dimension" (290).

In comparison with literary representation, pictorial representation may appear determinate, but this apparent determinacy is deceptive. As Sobchak argues in her phenomenological study of film experience, we make sense of a picture by mentally linking the visible and invisible:

The back of the lamp is not absent. Rather, it is invisible. It exists in vision as that which cannot be presently seen but is yet available for seeing presently. It exists in vision as an *excess* of visibility. . . . The most forcefully felt "presence" of such invisibility in vision is, at one pole, the unseen world, the *off-screen space*, from which embodied vision prospects its sights and, at the other pole, the

very enworlded eye/I, the *off-screen subject*, who enacts sight, revises vision, and perspectively frames its work as a visible image. (292)

Vision thus emerges in an interplay between the visible and the invisible:

This is not presence and absence set in opposition one to the other, but a pervasion of each in the other. The visible extends itself into the visibly 'absent' but existentially and experientially 'present.' And the invisible gives dimension to the visibly 'present,' thickening the seen with the world and the body-subject's *exorbitance*. The visible, then, does not reveal everything to perception. (294-95)

This doubleness of perception is intensified in the perception of objects that we regard as aesthetic objects, because these objects invite us to emphasize their non-identity and to reconstruct them anew mentally as objects. As long as we regard a picture as documentation or representation of an object, we may assume that the object represented in the picture exists. When we see it as aesthetic object, on the other hand, the picture assumes the status of a fictional text. We may still assume that objects of this kind exist but we do not insist that there must be an object in the real world exactly like the one represented and that the representation must correspond truthfully to it. However, if we do not base our perception of the picture on the assumption of a real object that is merely to be recognized, then, even in looking at a picture, we have to construct the represented object mentally, just as we have to construct literary characters like Hamlet or Huck Finn in order to constitute them as objects of experience. This description of the act of seeing may appear counterintuitive at first sight (in contrast to similar descriptions of the act of reading or the attendance of a play). How is it possible to say that we have to construct an object in order to give it reality, although we see the object represented right before our eyes? Iser's example of the actor may be of help here, for the picture can be seen as equivalent of the actor in his argument. Like the picture, we also see the actor before our eyes and comprehend him, in many instances, as a familiar character whom we can easily identify as type. And yet, we do not really know him, because the character never existed in the real world, so that the typical or familiar aspects which help us to recognize and classify him, only become props for triggering our mental and imaginary activities.

IV

The argument I have presented so far in order to extend my description of aesthetic experience to the perception/reception of pictorial images, may appear acceptable as a description of encounters with forms of pictorial representation that leave the viewer a certain degree of freedom in interpretation, such as paintings, art photography or the art film. But what about popular forms of pictorial representation such as the classical Hollywood film that have been described as ideologically especially effective forms of subject formation, based on the illusion of a referential transparency that makes ideology 'invisible'? For the current cultural radicalism this description of subject positioning has become a welcome explanation of how the political system creates (interpellates) subjects that are not aware of what is happening to them, because the cinematic apparatus, which places the spectator in the illusory position of an all-seeing, transcendental subject, reenacts a crucial aspect of subject formation, the misrecognition of the mirror phase described by Lacan.¹³ The powerful effect of the classical Hollywood film thus results from the fact that it constantly assures the spectator that "the imaginary unity of the mirror stage remains intact in face of the division and lack inscribed in the symbolic order" (Mayne 44).

Feminist critics such as Laura Mulvey have extended this theory in order to understand the construction of the subject in patriarchy.¹⁴ In both cases, apparatus theory and its feminist appropriation, the classical Hollywood film is seen as an especially effective form of interpellation, that is, of creating an (illusory) subject effect in the spectator by making the spectator reenact the experience of mirror misrecognition and dispelling the psychic traumas of the formation of the male subject through voyeurism

¹³ The classical accounts of apparatus-theory can be found in Baudry and Metz.

¹⁴ See Mulvey's seminal essay *Narrative Cinema* in which Mulvey uses "Freud's theories of the instincts and ego identification to understand how the classical cinema encourages a re-enactment of psychic trauma with the subsequent reassurance that the threat—usually women and/or castration in one form or another—has been dispelled" (Mayne 23).

and fetishism. Seen this way, the cinematic image is ideological by definition. The ideological effect no longer resides in the content of the film, but in its cinematic mode of representation—its implied spectator position, its 'transparent' images and its characteristic forms of narration and editing. Because this mode of representation has proven especially effective, the (classical Hollywood) cinema is seen not only as a model of how ideology works in Western political systems but also illustrates the centrality of vision in the subjection of the self in Western societies, so that certain, culturally dominant perceptions and forms of signification become equated with ideology.¹⁵

Is there room in such an account of the act of seeing for the second narrative? If we look at an actress like Rita Hayworth in a movie like *Gilda*, our point of view as omniscient, 'transcendental' spectator and the powerful image of femininity evoked by Hayworth appear to be designed to reaffirm a certain (male) identity and hence to predetermine our reception. However, even in this case the female appearance we see on film is presented by an actress who incorporates somebody whom we do not know and whom we therefore have to mentally construct and reconstruct as a character in the course of watching the film. In order to do this, we have to draw on our own imaginary, our own associations, emotions, and desires. Consequently, in the various interpretations of a film like *Gilda*, we encounter a number of different versions of Rita Hayworth, although these different Rita Hayworths always refer to the physically unmistakable appearance of the same woman. We do not only encounter this phenomenon in interpretations, however. It is part of any viewing experience. There is always, in viewing the film, a *Gilda*-narrative and there is a second narrative, a Winfried Fluck-meets-*Gilda* narrative, or a Richard Dyer-meets-*Gilda* narrative, or a Laura Mulvey-meets-*Gilda* narrative that provides the

¹⁵ Cf. Allen's summary of the argument: "Cinema is a form of signification that creates the appearance of a knowable reality and hence confirms the self-definition of the human subject as someone capable of knowing that reality; but in fact both reality and the human subject who appears capable of knowing that reality are 'effects' of a process of signification" (2).

basis for the transformation of the pictorial representation into an aesthetic experience.

For apparatus-theory and its feminist appropriation there exists no second narrative in any relevant sense. The whole point of the theory is to argue that what the spectator considers as his encounter with the film is, in effect, determined by cinematically-specific psychic mechanisms and hence scripted for him. The Winfried Fluck I am referring to is a heterosexual male and his imaginary encounter with Gilda will thus be written along certain gender lines: his identification with the camera perspective will give him a sense of power over the represented object, it will reconfirm his shaky masculinity by putting him in a position of visual control over the woman. It is possible that her appearance may signal to him the lack of the phallus and may thus create an anxiety of castration, but at the same time, he can fight this fear of castration by submitting the representation of the woman to voyeuristic or fetishistic visual pleasure and by seeing her punished in the end. However, whatever his voyeuristic pleasures may be, the second narrative is not his. It is the effect of a form of subject constitution along gender lines that, on the other hand, also puts Laura Mulvey's encounter with *Gilda* into all kinds of problems, because she basically only has two options, "masochism in her identification with her place as object in the patriarchal order" (Stacey 133-34) or narcissist identification with the woman as lack, as an object of the male gaze. In both cases, the second narrative is scripted for her. A gay viewer, in fact, might have the best deal. He can indulge in the signifying excess of the representation of Gilda by Rita Hayworth and see it as a sign of resistance, as Richard Dyer has done.¹⁶ However, this is already a reception that goes beyond the spectator positions described by apparatus theory.

I have introduced apparatus theory here as the most influential manifestation of the current cultural radicalism's description of the cinematic image as fundamental illusion upon which subjectivity (and, by implication: the aesthetic experience of the image) is based. Apparatus theory

¹⁶ See Dyer.

agrees that aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic experience are not merely effects of the image itself but of the reception of the image; however, this act of reception is reconceptualized as being determined by a spectator/subject position inscribed into the text. Hence, instead of opening up a space for resistance, negotiation, or, possibly, even transformation, reception becomes the site where the ideological effect takes hold almost imperceptively and, therefore, most effectively. We are here, in effect, at the other end of Dewey's description of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic pleasure does not emerge from the successful transfer of a particular attitude onto an object but as effect of a male unconscious that is constituted by sexual difference. In methodological terms, this is the equivalent of the psychoanalytic theory of transference on which we touched earlier, the transference of internal otherness onto aesthetic objects, so that the object of visual pleasure becomes an imaginary signifier for the male other.

However, one should add that a growing number of revisions of apparatus-theory, both from within and from outside the theory, have emerged in the last twenty years.¹⁷ There are new empirical studies on cognition and image comprehension,¹⁸ there is a lot of cultural studies work on audience research that distinguishes between textually inscribed spectatorial positions and the actual conditions of reception, between the theoretically constructed spectator and the historically and socially situated viewer, and emphasizes the complex, often ambivalent negotiations taking place between the two.¹⁹ There is also by now a long list of feminist studies (such

¹⁷ In her survey of theories of cinematic spectatorship, Judith Mayne discusses three approaches that have emerged from criticism of the apparatus model, "empirical approaches, which focus on the need to displace the 'subject' of apparatus theory and to study real people instead; historical approaches, which focus on specific forms spectatorship has taken rather than global definitions of the cinema as institution; and feminist approaches, which in foregrounding the female spectator examine the difference that gender makes" (7).

¹⁸ See, e.g., the summaries by Prince.

¹⁹ Stacey describes the starting assumption of this approach: "In addition to the general interest in how people make sense of popular culture, cultural studies work has emphasised the significance of the context of consumption. The focus on the viewing

as discussions of the 'woman's film' as a genre within the Hollywood system that constructs spectator positions for women), which take their point of departure from the irritating fact that apparatus theory does not leave any space for the female spectator and then go beyond "the passive specularity of the woman, her objectification as spectacle by and for the masculine gaze" (Penley 50). Altogether, there is a growing dissatisfaction with the assumption of one general psychic structure and with the explanatory range of the term sexual difference, so that Linda Williams can sum up the recent discussion by saying: "The monolithic subject positioned and conditioned by the text has proven much more socially and historically diverse than Metz, Baudry, Mulvey, or Wollen even allowed" (57).²⁰

context has been important in so far as audiences, rather than being ahistorical fixed positions in texts, have been considered as people with social lives and domestic habits, whose readings of particular programmes would be shaped and influenced by social identities and cultural differences, such as gender, race and class" (36). Within this context, two different emphases can be distinguished. One, exemplified by Tom Gunning and Miriam Hansen, is to differentiate between various periods characterized by different modes of cinematic address and modes of exhibition, the other, represented, among others, by Janet Staiger, is to emphasize the enormous variety of reception in any given period: "Let me make the proposition that every period of history (and likely every place) witnesses several modes of cinematic address, several modes of exhibition, and several modes of reception" (21). Staiger bases her case against psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship on the argument that they fail to grasp actual modes of reception which are dominated by contextual factors: "I believe that contextual factors more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives" (1). Staiger's focus on the unpredictable willfulness of the spectator creates the obvious problem, however, of explaining the different degrees of appeal different movies have. Obviously, context alone cannot determine aesthetic experience.

²⁰ There is also a growing tendency to salvage the psychoanalytic approach "from within" by dissociating Lacan from Althusser. James Donald, for example, in his essay "On the Threshold: Psychoanalysis and Cultural Studies," claims that the Althusserian/Lacanian "underestimated the structural resistance to identity . . . , the splitting of the ego and the inevitable mismatch of subject and culture that were the Lacanian contribution to Althusser's theory—not to mention those aspects of subjectivity 'beyond interpellation' that Althusser himself left out of account" (6). In her

What these different revisions of apparatus theory and its reappropriation by feminist film theory have in common is the insistence that the cinematically inscribed spectator position cannot determine the second narrative. The point is not that the various versions of apparatus theory cannot grasp important aspects of the voyeuristic and fetishist dimension of watching movies; the point is that they cannot explain the range of experiences and interpretations that take place within and beyond this dimension. Even where spectators may share unconscious dispositions as members of the same culture, class or social group, they may show entirely different responses to what they have seen, just as, on the other side, critics may share basic theoretical assumptions and concepts and may nevertheless arrive at entirely different interpretations of an aesthetic object, as Bordwell notes: "Two psychoanalytic critics might agree on every tenet of abstract doctrine and still produce disparate interpretations" (5). The reason for this divergence is that, inevitably, these critics use the aesthetic object to inscribe their own second narrative into the interpretation of the object so that, in fact, psychoanalytic theory provides only a narrative genre for the interpretation. This is not really so surprising in view of the fact that psychoanalytic theory, for example in the form of a Lacanian theory of subject formation, does not present a final, authoritative insight into the nature of subject formation but a cultural narrative that bears the imprint of its time and particular situational contexts. In her book on *The Self and Its*

essay, *Underworld USA: Psychoanalysis and Film Theory in the 1980's* Elizabeth Cowie argues that Lacanian psychoanalysis continues to be useful as a theory of human subjectivity and as a description of the construction of subject positions in relation to film, but no longer as a theory of ideology, because of, as Donald puts it in the same volume, ideology's failure "ever to get the full measure of subjectivity" (5). Thus, in contrast to Althusser, the starting premise is not the complete success of ideology, but its continuous and inevitable failure: "Now, in contrast to that claim that ideology can get the measure of subjectivity, the key question for any cultural theory (including psychoanalysis and/or cultural studies) is the *failure* of ideology" (7). The interesting question raised by these and similar arguments is whether and to what extent Lacan's work can survive without Althusser, or, to put it differently, whether it can teach us more than "to accept the impossibility of the perfection or completion of either subjectivity or of culture" (8).

Pleasure, Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject, Carolyn Dean has presented an exemplary analysis of how the self is constantly replotted and "why one story was told about the self" at certain times and not another (8). In focusing on how French medicine, psychoanalysis, and surrealism tried to rehabilitate the deviant in the interwar years with the goal of revitalizing society, Dean demonstrates in detail how these deviant others came to symbolize the structure of the unconscious, that is, our "real" self.²¹ More recent redescriptions have continued this constant replotting according to changing cultural, political, and also personal needs.²²

For example, Laura Mulvey's highly influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was written, as she herself points out, as a justification of the political avantgarde filmmaker Mulvey who looked for a theory that might be able to challenge the commercial cinema of the past (*Pleasures* 14). In order to achieve this, her essay aims at the destruction of aesthetic pleasure: "It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it.

²¹ Cf. Dean: "The psychotic is thus a metaphor for what is impossible, unknowable, and yet most true about the self: what Lacan calls the other par excellence - the real. As Shoshana Felman has argued the Lacanian unconscious cannot be 'discovered' under layers of repression" (118).

²² The rediscovery of Lacan by Althusser is inseparable from the usefulness which Lacan's theory of subject formation as misrecognition had for the revision of a Marxist concept of ideology as false consciousness and its redescription as a form of subject positioning. This revision provided the ideal answer to the vexing question why the working-class, the "revolutionary subject," ignored the New Left's analysis and refused to revolt against capitalism. By drawing on Lacan and locating the ideological effect already in the formation of subjectivity, cultural radicalism can provide an explanation why the subject freely accepts his subjection and can, in fact, argue, that it is exactly the illusion of autonomy which explains the efficacy of the ideological effect. There is no need of manipulation on the side of the system, because the subject, acting in the illusion that he is a self-conscious being and hence a free, autonomous agent, voluntarily accepts his own subjection. Thus, the "class struggle against bourgeois ideology could never take hold because there would be no possibility of the subject recognizing and resisting the hold of ideology over him" (Allen 13). Obviously, this theory is tailor-made for the needs of the critical intelligentsia,

That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represents the high point of film history must be attacked" (16). Mulvey's follow-up essay "Afterthoughts," on the other hand, qualifies her prior version of, as she calls it, "the undifferentiated spectator of 'Visual Pleasure'," (30) by addressing two questions which she shelved (or should one say, repressed?) as an issue in the "Visual Pleasure-essay": the "persistent question 'what about the women in the audience?'" (29) and, even more interestingly, her own love of Hollywood melodrama. Consequently, in her interpretation of King Vidor's film *Duel in the Sun*, Mulvey now looks for possibilities of trans-sex identification and describes a female spectator who "is much more than a simply alienated one" (Penley 384n.)—recovering, somewhat belatedly, an awareness that it is one of the possibilities opened up by fictional texts that one does not *have* to identify along gender, class, or racial lines. Thus, Mulvey's redescription of the aesthetic object allows her to describe the classical Hollywood film in a new, more differentiated way and to grant a space for aesthetic pleasure.

But the story goes on. In a later essay, "Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience," also reprinted in the volume *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Mulvey looks back at her earlier work from the perspective of the political disappointments of the 80s and attempts a reorientation that might help her to preserve her status as an avant-garde critic. From this point of view, the binary modes of thought of her earlier analysis are now reevaluated:

There is a sense in which this argument, important as it is for analysing the existing state of things, hinders the possibility of change and remains caught ultimately within its own dualistic terms. The polarisation only allows an 'either/or'. As the two terms (masculine/feminine, voyeuristic/exhibitionist, active/passive) remain dependent on each other for meaning, their only possible movement is into inversion. They cannot be shifted easily into a new phase or new significance. There can be no space in between or space outside such a pairing. (162)²³

for the only revolutionary practice that remains is that of "critical theory" which is to lead the fight against what Althusser calls the empiricist conception of knowledge.

²³ See also Mulvey's acknowledgment of the trap set by the feminist appropriation of Lacan: "The Lacanian representation of sexual difference (defined by the presence or

In search of such a space, Mulvey begins to theorize about "a possible dialectical relationship" between oppositions and arrives at a new kind of exemplary aesthetic object, collective cultural events that represent a

shared, social dimension of the unconscious of the kind that Freud referred to in *Jokes and the Unconscious*, which erupts symptomatically in popular culture, whether folk-tales, carnival or the movies. . . . If narrative, with the help of avant-garde principle, can be conceived around ending that is not closure, and the state of liminality as politically significant, it can question the symbolic, and enable myths and symbols to be constantly revalued. (175)²⁴

absence of the Phallus) leaves woman in a negative relation, defined as 'not-man', and trapped within a theory that brilliantly describes the power relations of patriarchy but acknowledges no need for escape" (*Pleasures* 165).

²⁴ In her essay "The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx," Mulvey points out, predictably, "how marginal the feminine is to the story" but then continues: "However, the story's narrative structure and the importance of investigation and telling in the story itself offers a Utopian promise, a pointer towards the transformative power of telling one's own story and the social function of popular culture as the narrativisation of collective fantasy" (*Pleasures* 199). See also Mulvey's essay "Americanitis: European Intellectuals and Hollywood Melodrama," in which she writes: "As a tentative working concept, the term 'collective fantasy' gathers together these strands of story telling and spectacle in popular cinema. These cultural symptoms can neither be contained within the concept of ideology nor understood as a reflective theory of historical representation" (*Fetishism* 26). The movement, it seems, leads from Lacan back to Freud: "Some aspects of a society's cultural production can be deciphered as symptomatic. These mythologies, images, scenarios, iconographies and so on bear witness to those aspects of social formations that are subject to censorship and repression, near to the taboos and phobias or erotic subcultures that necessarily comprise the underworld of human life. And it is these aspects of popular culture that psychoanalytic criticism focuses on, identifying and attempting to decipher and trace their symptomatic status" (27). The move from Lacan back to Freud is also noticeable in Cowie's essay on *Underworld USA*: "For this discussion, psychoanalysis has ceased to be metapsychology of cinema, that is, a general theory of the spectator's psychical relation to the film. Instead, psychoanalysis as a theory of human subjectivity has been used to describe a particular instance of the construction of a subject-spectator for film in *Underworld USA*; this is, of course, an effect of the cinematic codes at work in the film, but these have not been seen as determined by cinematically-specific psychical mechanisms. In one sense, however, psychoanalysis is thus a metapsychology for cinema, in so far as it is a theory of human subjectivity and hence can describe the construction of subject positions in relation to film. But the role of psychoanalysis as a metapsychology has undergone important changes. Its

Whatever one may think of these arguments: the reason why I refer to them here is that they are exemplary, not necessarily in their theoretical acumen, but in the continuous redescription of the object of analysis (and, by implication, of the aesthetic experience the image provides). This continuous redescription grows out of the necessity to readapt the object to changing needs that do not only reflect historical contexts but also individual responses to them.²⁵ Or, to put it differently: there is always a second narrative and this second narrative constitutes a new aesthetic object.

V

No less so than in the case of literature, although with different modalities, the aesthetic experience of the image, including pictures and motion pictures, is one in which non-identity and doubleness are constitutive. The visual text may contain an inscribed spectator position but that does not mean that the spectator is not also active in ways which reflect the appropriation of the picture for the articulation of a second narrative. One should be quite clear about the source of this activity. It does not lie primarily in the oppositional resourcefulness of certain groups or reception practices, although these may certainly intensify the activity. It emerges as logical consequence from the need to construe the object as an aesthetic object. Even where we try to remain true to the text's intentionality, we have to construct it mentally and thereby invest it with our own associations, emotions, and desires. Inevitably, the realization of the fictive world of the

theory of the subject is of a subject which is divided—the division of conscious and unconscious which was Freud's first discovery in psychoanalysis, the division of ego/super-ego/id, and the divisions involved in the very emergence of the super-ego—those various identifications internalised by the ego. Lacan's work has only clarified and extended Freud's theories in this respect" (135).

²⁵ Mayne grasps an important aspect of this individual response when she writes: "The danger in theories of female spectatorship is the potential romanticization of the female viewer: feminist critics may well be projecting their own desires to define their prefeminist investment in the movies as something 'positive,' or at least as not completely under the sway of dominant ideology" (92).

aesthetic object has its source in me. The result is a double state of mind: "we both identify ourselves with the characters, incidents, and themes of the work, but also keep them at a safe distance . . ." (Appleyard 39). We indulge in a temporary abandonment to the image and yet also take up the evaluative attitude of the onlooker. We become participant and observer at the same time. Or, to put it differently, we can be both object and subject of the act of seeing.

This double state of mind has significant consequences for the spectator, including that of the classical Hollywood movie. To start with, there is no stable, monofocal identification. We can take up multiple identificatory positions.²⁶ There is the possibility of "identification based on difference

²⁶ As Mayne points out, in the attempt to arrive at a more flexible account of spectator activities within a psychoanalytic frame of interpretation, Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten," with its focus on the possibilities opened up by fantasy, "has been read as offering a theory of multiple masculine and feminine positions, thereby lending itself to a definition of spectatorship as oscillation rather than 'identification' in a univocal sense" (86). For an example, cf. Constance Penley's summary of Bergstrom's argument: "One of the ways in which the psychoanalytic model has been redefined in its application to film can be seen very strikingly in Janet Bergstrom's reading of another of Bellour's favored theoretical objects, *Psycho*. Whereas Bellour argues that the woman is always the object of the man's look (and thereby adopts the basic Freudian fetishistic schema of the little boy's look onto the mother's body), Bergstrom's more complex counter-version of looking and identification in *Psycho* is taken from Freud's description of the structure of fantasy. For Bellour, the active male gaze (Norman's eye-phallus-camera) is directed towards Marion's body which passively received it (her *jouissance* in the shower serving only to excite his desire), in exactly the same way that the little boy enacts a fetishistic disavowal around the mother's 'penis' (he knows that it is not there, but *believes* it to be there nonetheless): the mother's body serving as the site of the little boy's narcissistic fantasy. In trying to move beyond this limited fetishistic interpretation, Bergstrom cites the multiple and successive identificatory positions found in fantasies like those reported to Freud primarily by female patients, and which are summarily expressed in the words 'A child is being beaten.' In the analysis, the patient reveals the progressive stages of the fantasy. At first, she says, 'My father is beating the child;' then, 'behind' that scenario is a more masochistic one consisting of 'I am being beaten by my father.' Finally, she reports, 'I am probably looking on.' As Freud puts it, the situation of being beaten, 'which was originally simple and monotonous [a child is being beaten], may go through the most complicated alterations and elaborations.' In this fantasy, then, the

and identification based on similarity" (Stacey 171). While there are masculine and feminine spectator positions, viewers do not have to assume these positions according to their assigned genders.²⁷ There are multiple and shifting points of entry for the spectator and there are unexpected crossover identifications. Moreover, we may identify with characters at one point but distance ourselves in the next when they act against our expectations. In its attempt to explain the powerful effect of the cinematic image, apparatus theory stresses the passivity of the spectator, whereas the actual experience of watching movies is one of moving in and out of characters, switching sides and sympathies, getting angry or disappointed with characters or plots (which we usually express by calling a film "unrealis-

woman respectively identifies, during its three stages, with the adult doing the beating, the child being beaten, and with herself as a spectator viewing the beating. She can thus be both subject or object, or identify with the entire scene itself. . . . Bergstrom concludes by insisting that it is now 'possible and absolutely necessary to complicate the question of identification as it functions in the classical film, first of all in terms of the realization that spectators are able to take up multiple identificatory positions, whether successively or simultaneously'" (48-9). Mayne provides another Freudian example for multiple, oscillating subject positions, taken from Laplanche and Pontalis: ". . . it is the very nature of fantasy to exist for the subject across many possible positions. Noting that 'a father seduces a daughter' is the skeletal version of the seduction fantasy, Laplanche and Pontalis describe this function as follows: 'The indication here of the primary process is not the absence of organization, as is sometimes suggested, but the peculiar character of the structure, in that it is a scenario with multiple entries, in which nothing shows whether the subject will be immediately located as *daughter*; it can as well be fixed as *father*, or even in the term *seduces*'" (88).

²⁷ Cf. Mayne's critique of Mulvey: "Laura Mulvey's theory of 'visual pleasure', for instance, is based on the assumption that the male protagonist of a film provides a vehicle for identification on the part of the male spectator. Two further assumptions are implicit here—one, that identification in the cinema does proceed primarily in terms of individuals in the audience and characters projected on screen; two, that identification is literal, at least according to dominant cultural conventions, so that men identify with male characters, women with female characters, and so on" (26). Already in 1984, Teresa de Lauretis wrote: "The analogy that links identification-with-the-look to masculinity and identification-with-the-image to femininity breaks down precisely when we think of a spectator alternating between the two" (142-43).

tic").²⁸ There is, altogether, a constant readjustment in response to the film and the way it affects us. The pleasure of fantasy, and also of the movies, is, as Judith Mayne has pointed out, that we do not "necessarily identify in any fixed way with a character, a gaze, or a particular position, but rather with a series of oscillating positions" so that the pleasures of watching a movie are also the pleasures of mobility, of moving around among a range of different desiring positions" (Williams 57).²⁹

Vivian Sobchak has described this activity in phenomenological terms in her attempt to understand filmic experience as an "embodied experience I live as 'mine'" (xvi). In objection to a description of the spectator as motionless and passive, she points out:

... as we all know from our own experience of being viewers as well as of being visible, spectators are always in motion. Embodied beings are always active, no matter how 'passive' they may be perceived from without. My vision is as active as the film's. What the film is doing visibly, I am doing visually. In the specificity of its prereflective spatial situation and reflective temporal consciousness, my lived-body experience in-forms how and what I see, and I do not merely 'receive' the film's vision *as* my own, but I 'take' it up *in* my own, and as an *addition* to my own. (271)

²⁸ Sobchak emphasizes these moments of "divergence": "Although Baudry and Metz describe those moments of the film experience in which we 'forget ourselves' in our interest in another's vision of the world, they neglect those moments in which we grasp ourselves in the recognition that our vision differs from that of the other" (276). "With every film we engage, we experience moments of divergence and rupture and moments of convergence and rapture" (286). In fact, it is in "moments of disjuncture and divergence that the film reveals itself most obviously to the spectator as an 'other's' intentional consciousness at work" (285).

²⁹ See also Stacey's summary: "Having outlined the different forms of identification in spectator/star relations, it is now important to reconsider some of the earlier models of identification and spectatorship in the light of this research. First, the *diversity* of the processes of identification and desire evident in these examples is striking. Within psychoanalytic film theory, the multiplicity of its formations in relation to the cinema have been ignored. The idea of a singular process of identification, so often assumed in psychoanalytic film theory, is unsatisfactory, and indeed reductive in the light of the range of processes discussed above" (170-71). The problem is not really solved by the acknowledgment of "multiple differences" along the lines of race,

The power of images to guide and sometimes overwhelm our perception misleads us into a conceptualization of the act of seeing as passive reception:

Thus, although generally I appear to be a polite visual 'listener' who seldom visibly and audibly interrupts or argues with my invited guest's narrative unless I am encouraged to do so by the form of her discourse; I am nonetheless actively engaged in an invisible and inaudible comparison of the guest's experience and performance with my own. (272)

The equivalent of what I have called second narrative in interpretation is an ongoing inner speech in reception.

For Sobchak, the filmic experience is dialectical and dialogic:

As my interest in my guest's narrative or argument increases, the intentional direction and terminus of my consciousness locates itself there, in *what* the guest sees. I am, however, not really *where* my guest sees. I still and always am embodied Here. (272)

Consequently, film is used in a parasitic way, inscribing one's own second narrative into the aesthetic object:

The spectator lives through a vision that is uniquely her own even if it is invisible from without, and the film has a material and situated body even if it is invisible from within. In a full description of vision in the film experience, as elsewhere, the introceptive and invisible aspects of subjective embodiment cannot be overlooked—even if they cannot objectively be seen. . . . The cinema, then, is an astonishing phenomenon. Enabled by its mechanical and technological body, each film projects and makes uniquely visible not only the objective world but the very structure and process of subjective, embodied vision—hitherto only directly available to human beings as the invisible and private structure we each experience as 'my own'. (298)

class, and gender studies, because such an acknowledgement only shifts the assumption of a common subject position to another level.

VI

My analysis of the aesthetic experience of the image has touched upon three major points: 1) An object is constituted as aesthetic object by taking a certain attitude toward it which foregrounds the object's referential non-identity. 2) The constitution of the object as aesthetic object depends on a transfer which is a crucial element of aesthetic experience. 3) This, in turn, raises the question of the nature of the transfer that constitutes the aesthetic object, a question that is of special theoretical interest with regards to pictorial representation, because the determinacy of pictorial representation seems to work against active mental constructions on the side of the recipient. However, Sobchak's argument opens up the possibility of characterizing the experience of watching a film as an interplay between visible and invisible elements by emphasizing "the invisible part of our vision—that part which does not 'appear' to us" (290), but forms an important part of the transfer through which we constitute the aesthetic object. Paradoxically enough, film may be especially effective in articulating imaginary elements, including different states of emotion, because its illusion of transparency invites us to attach such elements to images, which thereby come to represent something that is not 'visible,' but nevertheless 'present.' In watching a movie like *Gone With the Wind* after unification, for example, an East German viewer with her own personal history may draw on her own experiences of trauma and loss in order to make a fictive character like Scarlett O'Hara come to life and thus be strongly attracted by a movie which, on the surface, seems to represent an entirely different world. This, in fact, provides an explanation for the special impact that pictorial representation—and especially film—have on us: they are wonderfully effective in mobilizing and articulating imaginary elements, from individual affect to trauma, and in hiding them, at the same time, behind the immediate experience of the image.

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Looking Forward: 19th Century Projects

MARIO KLARER

Before Ornament was a Crime: Nineteenth-Century Theories of Pattern Design

Victorian culture stylized ornament on various levels, almost making it into a general mode of conceptualizing the world at large. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, evolutionary biology, art history, aesthetically motivated metaphysics and socio-economic utopianism adopted ornament for their own distinct purposes. As diverse as these discourses may seem, they all interconnect by continuously pointing back to the human body as the origin and recipient of ornamental embellishment. Drawing on a broad range of older discourses, pre-modernist ornamental theory gravitates around four distinct though interconnected dimensions: Victorian theorists anchor ornament in the human body; they superimpose a linguistic grid over pattern design in order to stylize it into the primordial code of all art; they regard ornament as a means of metaphysical transcendence; and finally, socio-economic thinkers deem ornamental design applicable for socialist-utopian speculation. This essay tries to make this vast nineteenth-century ornamental discourses accessible to postmodern readers who, having been trained in an aesthetics after the advent of modernism with its strong bias against decoration, are out of tune with this integral part of Victorian thinking.

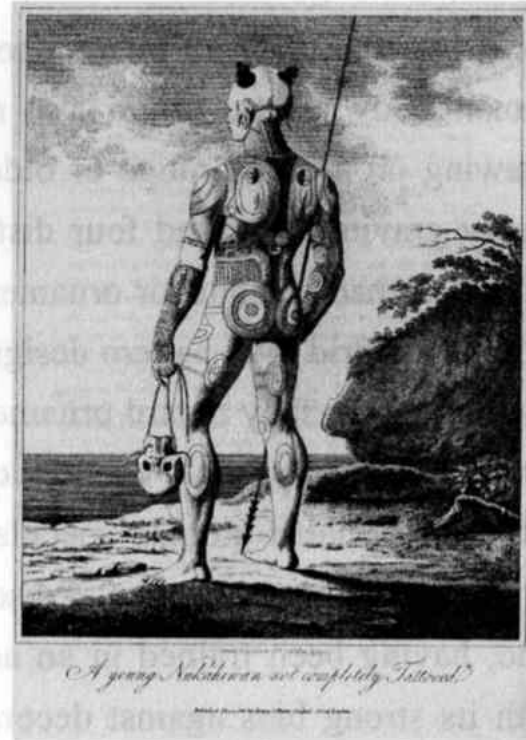
Ornament and the Body

Some issues which were to become major features of Victorian ornamental theories as, for example, an alleged connection to the human body, circulated in a variety of texts, including Melville's novels and earlier ethnographic narratives, before they were codified in focused treatises later in the century. Body ornament has been associated with primitivism since the

sixteenth century. Thomas Harriot, for example, in his *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588), encounters a dilemma when writing about native American bodily inscriptions. Afraid that these signs of primitivism might turn off potential colonists, he makes an elaborate explanatory detour to place these body marks in a positive light. He uses the image of an ancient Pict covered with ornamental body decoration arguing that "the Inhabitants of the greate Britannie haue bin in times past as sauage as those of Virginia" (75). Harriot thereby creates a possible parallel between America and Europe that suggests that the New World has the same potential for improvement and cultural development as the Old.



Engraving by Theodor de Bry after a drawing by John White, "The true picture of a vvomen Pictie II." From: Harriot 79.



Engraving after a drawing by George H. von Langsdorff, "A young Nukahivan not completely Tattooed." From: Langsdorff 119, Plate VII.

The connection between primitive ornament and the human body is perpetuated by later accounts of discovery and exploration, as for example, in G. H. von Langsdorff's account, which regards primitive tattoos as a means of stressing existing bodily features. When describing the ornaments on the body of a young Marquesan male he points out that

[t]he most perfect symmetry is observed over the whole body: the head of a man is tattooed in every part; the breast is commonly ornamented with a figure resembling a shield; on the arms and thighs are stripes, sometimes broader, sometimes narrower, in such directions that these people might very well be presumed to have *studied anatomy*, and to be acquainted with the *course and dimensions of the muscles*. (Langsdorff 122, emphasis added)¹

In a similar fashion, Herman Melville also accounts for the heavy ornamentation on the islanders' heads as an innate human drive to highlight natural facial traits, almost in the manner of contemporary make-up. The narrator in *Typee* suggests that his native companion applied tattoos "with a view of *improving the handiwork of nature*, and perhaps prompted by a desire to *add to the engaging expression of his countenance*" (83, emphasis added).²



"Female Head from New Zealand, in the Museum, Chester."
From: Jones 14.

One of the first full-fledged theoretical treatises on ornament in the nineteenth century, Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), also states that ornament, and consequently all visual art, originates in the human body (2).³ Jones begins his *Grammar* arguing that "there is scarcely a people, in however early a stage of civilisation, with whom the desire for ornament is not a strong instinct. The desire is absent in none" (13). According to Jones' theory, primitive peoples apply tattoos and physical ornamentation in order to highlight natural, i.e. existing, features of the human body. Jones places an illustra-

¹ In the caption that explains the illustration von Langsdorff re-emphasizes the connection between tattoos and anatomy: "At the back of the head may be perceived, as in all these islanders, two glands, which, as far as I know, have never been observed by any European, or by any anatomist" (xiv-xv).

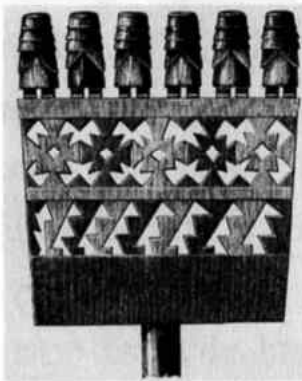
² Melville's explanation of body ornament as a desire to redraw the body within its own perimeters is almost identical with von Langsdorff's notion of anatomical accentuation, in which the decorated human frame becomes a primordial three-dimensional artifact.

³ For a discussion of Jones and a variety of other nineteenth-century notions of ornament, see Gombrich, *Order*.

tion of a mummified and heavily tattooed head from New Zealand at the beginning of his book to corroborate his ornamental theory of artistic evolution. He argues in the explanatory text that

[m]an's earliest ambition is to create. To this feeling must be ascribed the tattooing of the human face and body . . . The tattooing on the head which we introduce from the Museum at Chester is very remarkable, as showing that in this very barbarous practice the principles of the very highest ornamental art are manifest, every line upon the face is the best adapted to develop the natural features. (13)

These texts connect primordial ornamental decoration to the physical nature of the human body. Even when the skin is no longer inscribed, garments are decorated with ornaments and therefore still reflect the connection between body and art, or as Owen Jones puts it: "The stamping of patterns on the coverings of the body, when either of skins of animals or material such as this, would be the first stage towards ornament after the tattooing of the body by an analogous process" (15).



"Carved Paddle."
From: Jones 17.

Owen Jones obviously was not the only one to work with these ornamental tropes but he was the first to place them in a coherent theoretical framework and treatise on ornament. Many of Jones' motifs go back to eighteenth-century travelogues, for example, his plates with carved paddles and canoe heads, which he took from illustrations in *Cook's Voyages*. These objects, the tattooed head of a New Zealander and the allusion to garments, suggest three-dimensional 'artifacts,' thus evoking the art-

historical commonplace that the visual arts evolved out of the plastic arts. This Albertian notion was perpetuated by Giambattista Vico, who postulates that neither the Homeric epics nor the *Bible* mention two-dimensional representations or paintings but only three-dimensional reliefs.⁴ It is there-

⁴ "The arts of casting in low relief and of engraving on metals had already been invented, as is shown, among other examples, by the shield of Achilles. Painting had not yet been invented . . . [h]ence neither Homer nor Moses ever mentions anything

fore quite understandable that many of these evolutionary theories of art regarded the human body as the most primitive and most original three-dimensional 'object' used for ornamental decoration.

The primordial, museum-like character that theorists, such as Owen Jones, ascribe to physical ornament also surfaces in Melville's use of body art. The most striking, though highly coded, example is the narrator's depiction of his native companion:

[T]he entire body of my savage valet, covered all over with representations of birds and fishes, and a variety of most unaccountable-looking creatures, suggested to me the idea of a pictorial museum of natural history, or an illustrated copy of 'Goldsmith's Animated Nature'. (83)⁵

Melville's diction is important here since he equates tattoos with a 'pictorial museum,' thus emphasizing the 'archaeological' character that nineteenth-century theoretical texts associated with ornament as the preservers of art's origins.⁶ Melville's other simile, which compares native tattoos to

painted, and this is an argument of their antiquity" (Vico 306). For this and further references to Vico's notion on primitivism see Connelly 11-36.

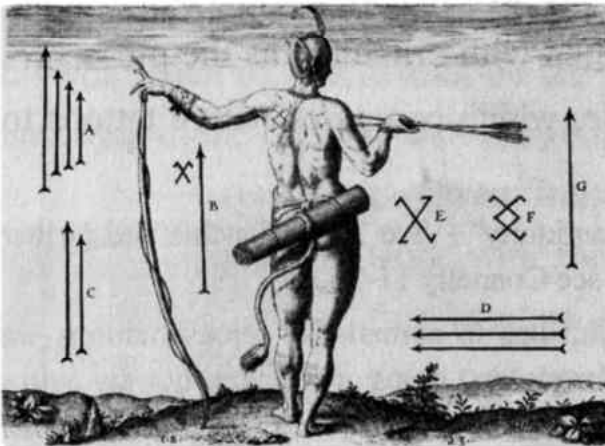
⁵ It is hard to decide whether Melville's allusions to animal-like representations are based on his eyewitness observations of Marquesan tattoos or whether they are a projection of a specific dimension associated with ornament in the mid-nineteenth century. The patterns recorded by von Langsdorff or Handy mostly show geometric designs, some of which might resemble stylized animal forms; see Plate 8, "Figures used in Tattooing" (122). Willowdean Chatterson Handy refers to one of the very first accounts of Polynesian tattoos by Quiros, who, on a visit to the south-eastern island in 1595, writes about shapes of "fish and other patterns" (15). Although none of the illustrations in Handy's account of Marquesan tattooing shows realistic animal representations, she summarizes accounts of living informants, who corroborate that animals were used in tattoo designs in the nineteenth century. In the texts of the Protestant missionary Ellis, animal motifs are very prominent. More than once he places Polynesian tattooing in the vicinity of idolatrous practices. For example, he quotes older sources which describe the islanders as "marked with snakes and dragons, and such like reptiles, which are very significant emblems of their own mischievous nature" (264-265).

⁶ When Melville refers to the spiral-like tattoos on the legs of an island queen in *Typee* as "resembling two miniature Trajan's columns" (8), he also evokes the historiographic dimension of ornament. The Trajan Column in Rome represents the history of Emperor Trajan carved in low relief.

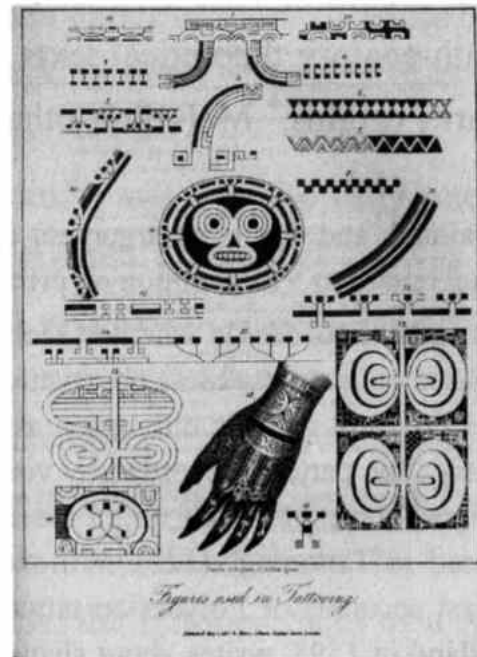
"Goldsmith's *Animated Nature*," a famous eighteenth-century natural history book, points towards writing as another related issue.

Ornament and Text

Influenced by concepts of the hieroglyph and the arabesque, authors from the Renaissance onward believed in the readability of ornament, associating it with language-like sign systems. Thomas Harriot's *A Brief and True Report* stylizes skin marks on the body surfaces of Virginia Indians as meaningful signifiers. He not only provides a list of shapes but also attempts to explain their meaning, treating them as if they were entries in a pictorial dictionary.



Above: Engraving by Theodor de Bry after a drawing of John White, "The Marckes of sundrye of the Cheif mene of Virgini." From: Harriot 74.



Right: Engraving after a drawing by George H. von Langsdorff, *Figures used in Tattooing*, 1803-07. From: Langsdorff 123, plate VIII.

It is therefore quite natural that G.H. von Langsdorff's pictorial list of tattoo shapes used in Nukahevan culture also treats body ornaments akin to linguistic phenomena. Von Langsdorff tries hard to present information about the meaning as well as the position of ornamental elements on the islanders' bodies, arguing that "[e]very figure has its distinctive name, and most of them are appropriated to a particular part of the body" (xv). By

giving the names of patterns, von Langsdorff treats them as meaningful signifiers, and, by specifying which part of the body they decorate, he also implies a syntactical structure at work within this sign system. Although von Langsdorff is not very successful in naming all patterns, he obviously attempts to write a 'grammar' of Nukahevan body ornament outlining a rudimentary pictorial lexicon as well as a concise visual syntax.



Arabian Ornament. From: Jones, plate 31.

As Owen Jones suggests through his title, *The Grammar of Ornament*, he also considers patterns to be reducible to quasi-syntactical or linguistic elements that make up a pictorial language of ornaments. The plate "Arabian Ornament," is one of the numerous tables of patterns in Jones' lavishly illustrated book, which list a vast number of designs typical of a historical period or a particular culture.⁷ Like von Langsdorff and Melville, Jones also implicitly suggests that it is possible to "read" ornaments and even argues that primitive ornamentation is the cradle of all visual art. In order to understand high

art better, one has to make oneself familiar with the primordial ornamental code, which functions like art's ur-language.

In the introduction to his book, Jones lists two central rules of ornament which permit him to argue for a 'natural' visual grammar:

First. That whenever any style of ornament commands universal admiration, it will always be found to be in accordance with the *laws* which regulate the distribution of form in nature. Secondly. That however varied the manifestations [of ornament] in accordance with these laws, the leading ideas *on which they are based are very few.* (2, emphasis added)

⁷ See Day, and Hamlin, who even reuses some of Jones's illustrations, as for example, the tattooed head.



From: Jones 15.

From this short passage the two major issues of Jones' general conception of ornamentation become apparent: ornament is based on natural laws, just as language is based on grammatical rules; and ornament can be reduced to a limited number of basic principles, similar to letters of the alphabet. A combination of is one of Jones'

examples explaining how ornament can function as a combination of few and simple elements (15). The fusion and repetitive arrangement of triangular shapes, for instance, permits constructions of complex and varied ornamental designs.

The way in which von Langsdorff, Melville and Jones categorize ornament is obviously modeled after linguistics and grammar. This move to superimpose a linguistic grid over phenomena in the visual arts is by no means their invention but rather goes back to Leon Battista Alberti, the 'father' of modern art theory. As Michael Baxandall has convincingly shown, Alberti's method of explaining the elements of painting in *De Pictura* (1435) is in accord with classical rhetoric. Alberti borrows rhetorical principles in order to describe major dimensions of painting (Baxandall 121-139, Hulse 57-76). The textualization or linguistic framing of ornament therefore, intentionally or unintentionally, draws on a long tradition that decisively shaped modern theories of the visual arts in general.

It is, however, also possible to account for the linguistic inclination in theories of ornament in a more direct way through the notion of the arabesque. Before the emergence of comprehensive ornamental theories in Victorian culture, the arabesque functioned as a synonym or umbrella term for anti-mimetical, visual representation in philosophical discourses, including texts by Kant, Goethe, Hegel and Schlegel.⁸ Often deliberately confounded with the term grotesque, the arabesque was a tempting object for reflection. Considered to originate in Arabic calligraphy, a hybrid of lan-

⁸ For an introduction to this heterogeneous recourse to the arabesque in eighteenth-century German thought see Behnke (229-240). For a more detailed analysis see Polheim who also provides some general remarks on the term before Schlegel (17-20).

guage and pictorial decoration, the arabesque oscillates between an anti-mimetic ornamental level and a stylized form of writing. Depending on the individual theorist commenting on the arabesque, either the signifying or the ornamental aspect was emphasized.



H. W. Phillips, *Portrait of Owen Jones*, 1857. © RIBA Library Photographs. From: Gombrich, *Order* plate 12.



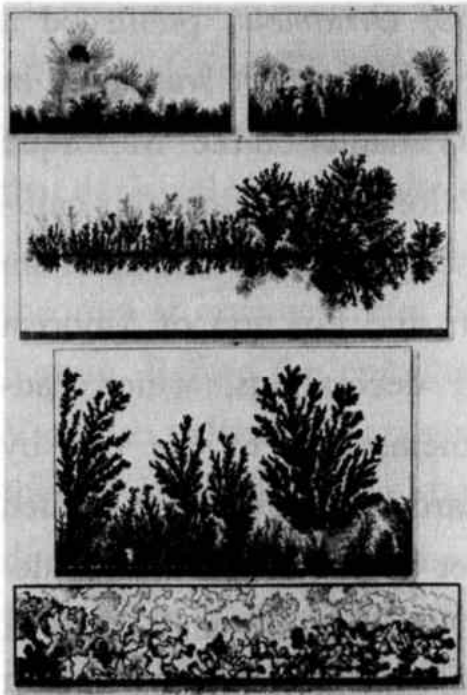
"There is no conqueror but God.'
Arabic Inscription from the
Alhambra." From: Jones 66.

Owen Jones, who prior to *The Grammar of Ornament* published a standard work on the Alhambra and was commissioned to decorate the Khedive's palace in Egypt, is therefore very much influenced by the notion of the arabesque. A portrait by H.W. Phillips shows Owen Jones against a background of a Moorish wall decoration probably from the Alhambra. Interestingly enough the middle ribbon on the wall features a calligraphic decoration that Jones also uses in *The Grammar of Ornament*, published a year before the portrait was done in 1857. In his chapter on the "Moresque Ornament" Jones introduces this calligraphic inscription from the Alhambra as a key to the function of Moorish ornamental decorations, which "addressing themselves to the eye by their outward beauty, at once excited the intellect by the difficulties of deciphering their curious and complex involutions, and delighted the imagination when read" (66).

The reason for this linguistic framing of pictorial phenomena in the nineteenth century is most probably the same as Alberti's motivation to categorize painting in rhetorical terminology four hundred years earlier.

Since literature always held a privileged status over the visual arts, the association with writing and language was supposed to lift the lesser arts to the level held by accepted disciplines. Of course, not all theories of the ornament subscribe to the concept of 'readable' decoration. However, there is a strong tendency in Victorian ornamental theory to associate pattern design with notions of pictorial writing.

The connection between writing and ornament also stems from the seventeenth-century concept of 'natural hieroglyphics' allegedly produced by nature. In recent publications, Barbara Stafford gives an illuminating account of tendencies to textualize mineral phenomena in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century scientific discourses (*Voyage* 283-346).⁹ The practice of regarding natural formations as artifices goes back to classical texts by Seneca, Apuleius and Pliny, who pondered over the art-like surfaces produced by nature in plants or animals, including the check-work of oyster shells or the designs on peacock feathers. In early modern Europe mineral representations were the prime locus of attention. Prior to the mid-eighteenth century these marks of nature were generally regarded



G. W. Knorr, *Dentrite Agate*.
From: Stafford, *Voyage* 304.

as owing their shapes and traits to simple fortuity, or as Stafford puts it in *Voyage into Substance*: "The distinctive decorations and ornamental incrustations contained within their contours were interpreted as accidents, evidence of nature's capacity to sport" (233). Scientific discourses of the second half of the eighteenth century "speculated that imaged stones were remains of flora and fauna, thereby opening tantalizing vistas onto the dawn of history" (233).

Prime examples of this eighteenth-century notion of lapidary representations are

⁹ See Stafford, *Characters*.

the plates on "Dentrite Agate" in George Wolfgang Knorr's *Recueil de monumens des catastrophes* (1768-1775). Obviously these mineral marks do not have any real connection with prehistoric flora but, since these arbitrary



Graphic Granite of Siberia. Engraving by Caquet after a drawing by Desene. From: Stafford, *Voyage* 302. By permission of the British Library.



Cryptograms from Poe 284.

formations are reminiscent of plant shapes, eighteenth-century discourses eagerly considered them as a prehistoric, museum-like site of preservation. At times natural formations were directly associated with writing, as for example, in Eugène-Melchior Patrin's *Histoire naturelle des minéraux* (1800-1801) or Faujas de Saint Fond's *Essai de géologie* (1803-1809), which refer to the behavior of graphic granite as writing. Barbara Stafford summarizes, quoting de Saint Fond: "[t]his natural hieroglyph, compounded of quartz crystals and, occasionally, feldspar, 'presents a certain kinship with Hebrew or Arabic letters'" (*Voyage* 237). Others, such as the geologist James Hutton, compared these formations to runic signs.

A famous nineteenth-century literary adaptation of 'natural hieroglyphics' is the cryptogram in Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). In one particular scene, Pym and his companion Peter discover indecipherable inscriptions on the walls of a granite chasm on an island. The representation of the cryptogram included in the published text is very reminiscent of the granite marks described as letters in eighteenth-century scientific discourses. The figures in Poe's novel assume that they encountered a man-made inscription in an unknown alphabet, only to find out later that they had erred and that it is "the work of nature" (284).

As the above examples show, nineteenth-century ornamental theories were able to connect to a variety of older discourses which also intended to textualize ornaments. The connection between art and nature is by no means restricted to the linguistic framing of ornamental designs produced by natural forces. Particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of theories of design use nature as the model for good ornament and consequently for good art.

Ornament and Transcendence

Metaphysically informed discourses on ornament by such important art critics as John Ruskin, who advocates ornament as a means of transcendence, continue the long-standing connection between ornament and nature. Ruskin, for example, thinks that all good ornament can be reduced to basic natural building blocks—resonances of Jones' "Grammar." Thus, in *The Stones of Venice* (1853) Ruskin, with a religiously motivated pathos, argues for a natural ornament that should not depict man-made things but rather render vegetable-corporeal elements found in nature:

I conclude . . . that all ornament is base which takes for its subject human work For to carve our own work, and set it up for admiration, is a miserable self-complacency, a contentment in our own wretched doings, when we might have been looking at God's doings. And all noble ornament is the exact reverse of this Now in what are you rightly happy? Not in thinking of what you have done yourself; not in your own pride; not your own birth; not in your own being, or your own will, but in looking at God; watching what He does; what He is; and obeying His law, and yielding yourself to His will. You are to be made happy by ornaments; therefore they must be the expression of all this. (264-265)¹⁰

Ornament has a transcendental effect, allowing the viewer to regard universal principles or ideas manifested in God's work. For Ruskin this epistemological aspect is not limited to ornament but rather represents a general motif in his discussion of visual art in general, as can be seen in the following passage from chapter 3 in *Modern Painters I*:

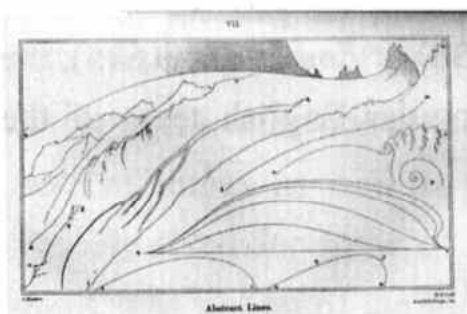
¹⁰ This passage from Ruskin is also quoted by Trilling (58).

And thus, though we want the thoughts and feelings of the artist as well as the truth, yet they must be thoughts arising out of the knowledge of truth . . . We do not want the mind to be as badly blown glass, that distorts what we see through it, but like a glass of sweet and strange colour, that gives new tones to what we see through it; and a glass of rare strength and clearness too, to let us see more than we could ourselves, and bring nature up to us and near to us. (qtd. in Wihl 7)

"Good" works of art, which include "good" ornamental works, allow the essence of nature to appear more clearly than nature itself. Only a small step separates this Victorian attitude from the postmodern preference for representation over the 'real thing.' Abstract ornament which incorporates natural elements helps the work of art to achieve transparency, or transcendence.

In *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin postulates that "whatever God has created" can serve as the model of ornamental design (265). Like Owen Jones, who tries to reduce ornament to a few fundamental laws, Ruskin breaks design down into quasi-syntactic elements. He aims at treating what Owen Jones calls "natural laws" in the form of elemental lines of ornament which embrace, "from lower to higher, the whole range of systematised inorganic and organic forms" (265). To this end, Ruskin divides the repertoire of elements in ornamental design into twelve rubrics which range from inorganic substances to lower organisms and all the way up to human beings:

- (1.) Abstract lines. (2.) Forms of Earth (Crystals). (3.) Forms of Water (Waves).
- (4.) Forms of Fire (Flames and Rays). (5.) Forms of Air (Clouds). (6.) (Organic Forms). Shells. (7.) Fish. (8.) Reptiles and Insects. (9.) Vegetation (A). Stems and Trunks. (10.) Vegetation (B). Foliage. (11.) Birds. (12.) Mammalian animals and Man. (265-266)



"Abstract Lines." From: Ruskin 268, plate VII.

As an illustrative example Ruskin inserts a diagram containing basic abstract lines, item number one in his list. He comments: "I have drawn, as accurately as I can, on the opposite plate . . . some ten or eleven lines from natural forms of very different substances and scale" (267). He singles out two lines for further explana-

tion: "[T]he first, *a b*, is, in the original, I think, the most beautiful simple curve I have ever seen in my life; it is a curve about three quarters of a mile long, formed by the surface of a small glacier of the second order, on a spur of the Aiguille de Blaitière (Chamouni)" (267). Based on natural objects, these abstract lines can be used in designs without directly relating to their models in nature. These lines are employed "when it is not right or possible to render such forms distinctly imitative" (266). However, according to Ruskin, all of these abstract lines reflect the essence, or "universal property" (267), of nature and thus share features of mimetic art.

In sum, Ruskin ascribes an epistemological quality to ornament by regarding decorative representation as a means of attaining transcendence. His seemingly paradoxical explanation of ornament as simultaneously abstract and mimetic is in accord with a general nostalgia for a natural sign prevalent in Western thinking from the Renaissance onward. These older discourses mostly revolve around the concept of the hieroglyph as a phenomenon which obliterates the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified by replacing it with a one-to-one correspondence between an object and its representation.

The Renaissance interest in hieroglyphs is closely connected with the discovery of what is called the *Hieroglyphica* by Horapollo in 1419.¹¹ The ideograms in this text were considered to be a primordial, prelapsarian writing, which expressed divine wisdom more directly than alphabetical writing. The notion of the hieroglyph as an intersection of picture and text exerted a considerable influence on the evolution and popularity of emblem books in the Renaissance as, for example, Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata* (1531) or Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593) in Italy and Francis Quarles's *Hieroglyphics of the Life of Man* (1638) or *Emblemes* (1635), the latter two of which rank among the most popular English texts of the seventeenth century.¹²

¹¹ See Boas.

¹² See Haight, and Freeman 114. Quarles's *Emblemes* went through three editions during his lifetime, altogether reaching close to fifty editions (Gilman 85).

Christian Neo-Platonic philosophy was particularly interested in pseudo-Egyptian hieroglyphs as a means of metaphysical transcendence. Supposedly in a position to bridge the gap between signifier and signified—to use Ferdinand de Saussure's terminology—the Egyptian hieroglyph had already been an object of interest to ancient philosophers. Plotinus, the prime source of Christian Neo-Platonism, writes that the Egyptians "carved one picture for each thing in their temples Thus each picture was a kind of understanding and wisdom and substance, given all at once, and not discursive reasoning and deliberation" (qtd. in Gombrich, *Images* 158). This belief in a prelapsarian code of picture-writing, together with the above-mentioned rediscovery of (pseudo-) hieroglyphs, influenced the following passage by Marsilio Ficino, the major figure in Renaissance Neo-Platonism:

When the Egyptian priests wished to signify divine mysteries, they did not use the small characters of script, but the whole images of plants, trees or animals; for God has knowledge of things not by way of multiple thought but like the pure and firm shape of the thing itself. (Qtd. in Gombrich, *Images* 158-59)

Murray Krieger, who in his book on *ekphrasis* also refers to these crucial passages on a transcendental sign system, astutely summarizes the role of the hieroglyph in Renaissance and post-Renaissance thinking:

[A]ccording to Ficino, the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians, though a language of pictures, are an emblematic code rather than a direct imitation of objects presumably being represented. So, on one side, pictures as natural signs are rejected as imitations of the lowly sensible, and on the other, language-as-words, though seeking the intelligible, is rejected as symbolically empty. Between them are pictures-as-language—a sacred language of presence—which, essentially locked into the ontological hermeneutic, indirectly reveal intelligible reality to us by speaking the unmediated language of God as the only possible sensible representation of Platonic ideas. (19-20)

Krieger's reference to the paradoxical status of hieroglyphs as both symbols of things as well as pictorial representations of these things could equally stand for some of the metaphysically informed theories on ornament. The notion of the hieroglyph, which is both pictorial representation and verbal representation at the same time, was thus stylized as ornament into a privileged mode of representation.

Ruskin's metaphysics of the ornament is indirectly continued by the designer and theoretician of the Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris. His reflections on "pattern design" elaborate on the metaphysical and transcendental quality Ruskin ascribed to ornament. In one of his lectures, William Morris defines pattern-design as

the ornamentation of a surface by work that is not imitative or historical, at any rate not principally or essentially so . . . but whatever material relief it may have is given to it for the sake of beauty and richness, and not for the sake of imitation, or to tell a fact directly; so that people have called this art ornamental art, though indeed all real art is ornamental. (175)

On the one hand, Morris dismisses mimetic-imitative qualities in ornament; on the other hand, like Ruskin, he believes that the use of natural vegetable elements, while not capable of recreating nature, nevertheless allows nature's essence to be represented. "[Ornaments] will remind him not only of the part of nature which, to his mind at least, they represent, but also of much that lies beyond that part" (181); "any decoration is futile . . . when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol" (179); "this kind of art must be suggestive rather than imitative" (177). Ornament is not supposed to represent nature itself, but its essence. Through its abstract yet realistic character—it employs realistic elements in creating abstract patterns—ornament points beyond the particular to the idea of nature. Morris alludes to the impossibility of comprehensively representing nature per se when he says "You can't bring a whole country-side, or a whole field, into your room, nor even a whole bush . . . These are limitations which are common to every form of the lesser arts" (181). Consequently, ornament has the role of "conventionalizing nature" (181), functioning like a metaphysical *pars pro toto*, which uses elements of the whole to represent the essence of the whole more effectively.¹³

¹³ For the metonymic quality of ornament in the works of John Ruskin see Wihl who sees a tendency in all of Ruskin's works "to substitute part for whole, partial, limited perspectives for total 'sublime' apprehension" (4).

A number of theoretical texts in the nineteenth century refer to ornament as a means of coming closer to the essence of nature. They thereby draw both on the concept of ornament as a meaningful sign system and on the long tradition of searching for a natural language that reached a first climax in Renaissance notions of the hieroglyph. Later in the century, this metaphysical concern feeds into socio-economic theories, which again place ornament at the center of their utopian agenda.

Ornament and Utopia

William Morris, as a designer and mouthpiece of the dogmata of the Arts and Crafts Movement, uses the metaphysical property that Victorian culture ascribed to ornament in order to apply it to his socialist-utopian concerns. His reasoning brings us closest to the issues that Charlotte Perkins Gilman raises in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*. Morris' vision of ornament as an industrial 'art,' accessible to the general public, was most applicable to wallpaper, the subject of Gilman's story. The development of endless paper around 1800 and the adaptation of textile printing presses caused a major transition from wallpaper manufacturing to machine production between 1800 and 1920.¹⁴

According to Morris, mass-produced ornament with its roots in traditional domestic crafts was to fulfill once again a central function in the worker's home, granted its correct implementation. In his reflections on wall decoration, which he considers "the widest use of pattern-designing" (175), Morris lists the ideal functions of ornament in Victorian culture.

Now, to sum up, what we want to clothe our walls with is (1) something that it is possible for us to get; (2) something that is beautiful; (3) something which will not drive us either into unrest or into callousness; (4) something which reminds us of life beyond itself, and which has the impress of human imagination strong on it; and (5) something which can be done by a great many people without too much difficulty and with pleasure. (179)

¹⁴ For a good overview see Lynn 301-315.

In his capacity as designer, Morris drafted a number of famous wall-paper patterns, most of which recall plants. Wallpaper with natural ornaments holds an important position in his reasoning since he was convinced that the ornaments to which man is exposed most frequently recalled nature to guarantee best results:

[I]t will be enough for us to clothe our daily and domestic walls with ornament that reminds us of the outward face of the earth, of the innocent love of animals, or of man passing his days between work and rest as he does. I say, with ornament that reminds us of these things, and sets our minds and memories at work easily creating them; because scientific representation of them would again involve us in the problems of hard fact and the troubles of life, and so once more destroy our rest for us. (177)



William Morris, *Pimpernel* 1876, wall-paper design. Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1935-23-18, gift of Cowtan and Tout, Inc. From: Lynn 346.

Here, Morris stresses once again the socio-political bearing of ornamental design on the worker's well-being; however, he also alludes to the negative influences of unsuitable forms of representation. Morris' warnings regarding the dangers of ornamental design foreshadow issues that Charlotte Perkins Gilman raises in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The following quote refers primarily to the workers involved in the manufacture of ornaments but it can apply just as well to the viewer exposed to it.

I should like to remind them [pattern designers] of one thing, that the constant designing of recurring patterns is a very harassing business, and should always be supplemented with some distinctly executive work. Those who in the present unhappy state of the arts do not design for work which they carry out themselves should relieve their brain by drawing from the human figure, from flowers or landscapes or old pictures, or some such things; by doing something which is not a diagram, but is an end in itself, or they will either suffer terribly or become quite stupid . . . Designers . . . have a great tendency to go mad. (201)

Morris' warning directly connects to Gilman's story, which also discusses the potential danger inherent in ornamental design on the psyche of the person exposed to it. Gilman's story does not simply use these ornamental tropes uncritically, rather she highlights them as issues that back up patriarchal power structures designed to keep women in their places.

We can therefore isolate four main points concerning the nature of ornament in nineteenth-century culture: Firstly, primitive ornament originates in the *human body* and thus continues to maintain a connection with human nature. Secondly, ornament is seen in linguistic terms as a primordial pictorial *language* spelling out and preserving the origins of high art. Thirdly, ornament has a transcendental and *metaphysical quality* forcing the essence of nature to become most apparent through a paradoxical mixture of realistic and abstract representation. And finally, ornament has an *utopian dimension*, influencing the well-being of people.

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MICK GIDLEY

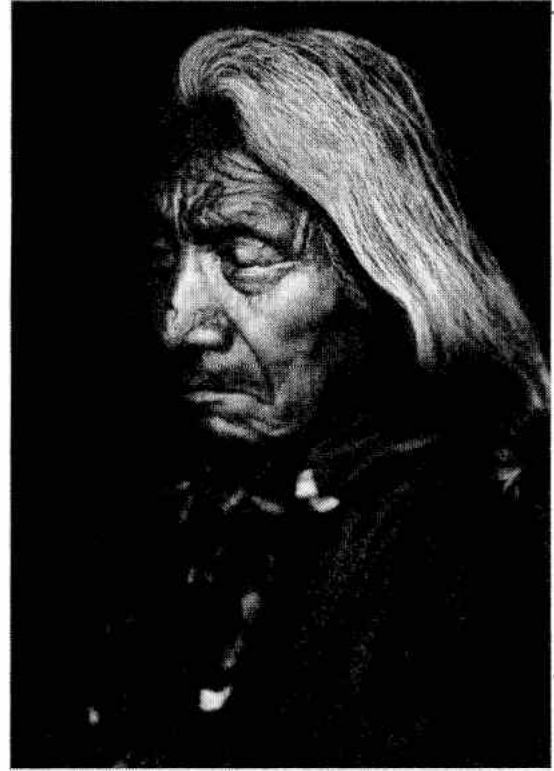
Edward S. Curtis' Photographs for *The North American Indian*:
Texts and Contexts

The North American Indian, all too often attributed solely to its announced author, Edward S. Curtis, and published between 1907 and 1930, was—and is—monumental. Consisting of twenty volumes of illustrated text and twenty portfolios of large-sized photogravures, originally sold in a severely limited edition on a subscription basis to major libraries and wealthy individuals, and, most importantly, devoted to a goodly proportion of the indigenous peoples of western North America, it is now commonly recognized as one of the most comprehensive representations of Native Americans ever produced. It is certainly one of the most influential to appear in the twentieth century, demanding in this respect to be ranked alongside the construction by John Ford and others of the generic Hollywood Western. In fact—with funding from J. Pierpont Morgan, with backing from Theodore Roosevelt and a succession of Commissioners for Indian Affairs, and involving, in its heyday, not just Curtis but a whole (changing) team of ethnologists and Indian assistants and informants—it demands understanding as the largest American anthropological venture ever undertaken.¹

Since the revival of interest in Curtis that occurred in the early 1970s, images from *The North American Indian* have become pervasive. Many people will have seen one or more of Curtis' portraits of such leaders as Red Cloud of the Oglala Sioux (1905), Geronimo of the Chiricuaaha

¹ The portfolio photogravures from Curtis' *The North American Indian* (hereafter *NAI*) are all reprinted, together with a selection from the text volumes in Curtis' *Complete Portfolios*. Full information on *Curtis and The North American Indian* may be found in Gidley, *Curtis*, all subsequent uncited data is taken from this source.

Apaches, or Joseph of the Nez Percés. Red Cloud, caught in his blind old age, looks slightly downward, as if in wistful contemplation of the past, Geronimo, in jugged profile, gazes "ahead," while Joseph—in the portrait without his headdress (there are two in *The North American Indian*, one bareheaded, the other with feather bonnet)—looks ahead in another sense, in that he seems almost to return our gaze, inviting both an investigation of his history and a consciousness of our own response to it. "Mostpeople," to use E. E. Cummings' portmanteau word, will



E. S. Curtis, *Red Cloud*, 1905.
Courtesy University of Exeter
Library.

have seen a poster version of Curtis' most reproduced shot, "Cañon de Chelly" (1904), which depicts a group of Navajo people riding across the floor of the magnificent cañon at the heart of their homeland. Compositionally, the heads of the Navahos are *just* below the horizon line, insuring that we see them as familiar with, related to, at home in, what could be an alien environment. It is such a memorable image because—while effectively registering the scale and grandeur of the cañon walls—it shows the people totally at one with this awesome landscape.² If we take these photographs as representative of Curtis' Indian imagery as a whole—and, of course, with an output of *The North American Indian's* magnitude this is an admittedly reductive thing to do—we might well think that the outlines of its vision of Indians are drawn with relative sharpness: they are

² The images chosen for discussion here are, for the most part, much reproduced; the dates given are those printed in NAI, sometimes modified by research knowledge. The Joseph image is discussed in Gidley, *A Hundred Years* and in Alison 152-67, esp. 166.

proud, ecologically correct, and (because unable to survive in the ways depicted) tragic.

In my *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated* (1998), a study of the project as a total enterprise—that is, I did not restrict myself to the imagery alone—I have attempted, in detail, to examine and critique such a version of the project's vision, arguing not so much that it is untrue, but that it is insufficiently problematized. There were political, economic, ideological and aesthetic determinants of the project's representation of Native Americans. *The North American Indian* was massive and has had profound effects; the project to produce it was extraordinary and, in some respects, even unique; yet both the project and its product were also, paradoxically perhaps, typical of their phase of American history. There were, in other words, cultural constraints and contexts to the project's Indian vision. Curtis himself did not see the project this way. For the most part, he presented *The North American Indian* as a straightforward "record." In a 1911 speech he said, "It is an effort to make a broad picture and word record of the Indians," and in 1914, at the height of this fame, he published in the *American Museum Journal* his "Plea for Haste in Making Documentary Records of the American Indian." In it he claimed that "we want the documentary picture of the people and their homeland—a picture that will show the soul of the people" (163-65).³

In this essay I want to tell—or, in certain instances, retell—just a little of the Curtis story and, in doing so, I also hope to complicate it further, to bring out different contradictions and ambiguities to those advanced in my book, especially with regard to the aesthetics of its imagery. The essay does not pursue a linear advance; it is, rather, a series of overlapping probes. But in the least of these, despite my awareness that no record, however "documentary," was ever straightforward or neutral, but always inflected by the assumptions of the individuals and cultures that produced it, I want ultimately, if hesitantly, to agree with Curtis that some of his images do "show the soul of the people."

³ See Curtis, *script* and Gidley, *Curtis*.

I

One of the most obvious—though usually unrecognized—complications of the project is that what Curtis sometimes called "the word picture" offered by *The North American Indian* does not always tessellate with its better-known pictorial content. The Morgan funds enabled the establishment of *The North American Indian, Incorporated*, and the employment of a field team. The key figure so engaged—the chief ethnologist and, ever more emphatically, writer of *The North American Indian*, at least through Volume Eighteen, published in 1928—was William Edward Myers. Myers, a former newspaperman with a gift for languages, trained himself on the job, by absorbing, if in a slightly condescending manner, what his elderly Indian subjects had to tell him, but he was also an avid reader of published ethnography, and he was not innocent of theoretical issues of representation. There are hints in Myers' correspondence that the writing and the picture-gathering sometimes meshed very uneasily. On one occasion he expressed the desire to avoid a situation that would result, as he put it, "in a miscellaneous collection of photographs around which a text is to be written." This is a crude generalization, but there are some important disjunctions between the words and the pictures. For example, "Atsina War Party's Farewell" (1908) is one of a sequence that Curtis made based on a re-enactment of an Atsina war party. There are eight such pictures in the sequence, including, for instance, "The War Party's Report." When we read the relevant section of Volume Five (1911; 130-36) we see that Myers had to break off his analysis of Atsina social organization to allow for a rather redundant purely narrative account of a war party's activities simply because the pictures existed.⁴ This kind of sequence, on the other hand, had a visual life of its own, in that such re-enactment series—and Curtis made similar ones of other Plains peoples, such as the Crows—seem to have provided the iconographic basis for countless war party attacks in Western movies.

⁴ Cf. Myers, letter to F. W. Hodge, 9 February 1926 (qtd. in Gidley, *Curtis* 149).

Another example of a disjunction between words and images—this time the other way round—may be witnessed in the Hopi volume (Twelve, 1922). We find there a written account of Hopi factionalism at the beginning of the century, when political conflict between more and less "traditional" groups led even to the violent division of a community and the founding of a new village—factionalism that Curtis parties had witnessed firsthand—but *The North American Indian* contains no *images* pertaining to it. Now it may be that Curtis himself was not present to witness the most physical manifestations of the conflict—which were captured, quite separately from the Curtis project, by Kate Cory, a long-term resident of the Hopi pueblos who seems to have enjoyed the full trust of the people there—but absence at the decisive moment in 1906 is not the only possible explanation. It is just as likely that such undignified scenes—in one surviving Cory image three disputants struggle in the dirt of a doorway—were not ready constituents of the overarching visual representation of Indian life that Curtis had in mind.⁵ Its invocation of a highly specific moment would butt up against notions of Indians as inhabitants of a "natural" pre-contact dimension that, as we will see, was a norm for Curtis' text. And, as we might already expect, its denotation of political squabbling among Indians would jar against the text's stress on their stoic nobility.

II

The quest to arrive at an adequate understanding of the constituents of the project's visual rendition of Indians is also complicated by the fact that the portfolios of pictures and millions of words printed in the volumes of *The North American Indian* are not the only evidence we have to take into account. It could be argued that, if Curtis' own biography is a primary determinant of the representation of Indians in *The North American Indian*,

⁵ For factionalism, see *NAI*, Vol 12, 66-68. For Cory, see her *Hopi Photographs*. Unfortunately, there is no mention of the factionalism in the history of photography in Hopiland provided by Masayesva, Jr./Younger.

potentially at least any and all of this work, in whatever genre, is relevant—and I have myself argued elsewhere that he took into the Indian field Pictorialist practices acquired primarily from a knowledge of the Photo-Secession. In this essay I am restricting myself to photographic imagery alone (that is, I will largely ignore the evidence of published and unpublished *written* material extra to *The North American Indian*). Even so, this still leaves, as well as *The North American Indian* itself, attendant photographic exhibitions, two photographically illustrated "supplementary readers" for the general public, magic lantern lectures, the 1911 epic entertainment called the "musicale" or "picture-opera," popular illustrated magazine articles, and, of course, vast numbers of photographs reproduced



E. S. Curtis, *Postcard Image of Red Thunder*, 1903. Courtesy Photography Collection, University of Washington Libraries.

in countless outlets. That is, Curtis worked in a number of different registers. He produced, for example, a series of postcards: His image of Red Thunder, a young Nez Perce who accompanied Chief Joseph on a 1903 visit to Curtis' Seattle studio, where he picked up the bow and arrow shown in the postcard portrait, did not appear in *The North American Indian*. It was meant for a different market and seems to reflect, even encapsulate, an entirely different sensibility.⁶ I suggest that, within this huge output, at least two categories of photographs should be distinguished from the main body of pictures in *The North Ameri-*

⁶ Further information on this Seattle visit may be found in Gidley, *Kopet* 55-61. For other postcards, see Gidley, *Curtis* 256. We will return to this kind of imagery.

can Indian: the first is Indian imagery definitely made for other purposes, for publication elsewhere; and the second is publicity imagery for *The North American Indian*. Let me discuss them in turn.

Very many of Curtis' Indian pictures were first published in the illustrated press, but it is not this separate publication in itself that creates a problem, even when we get slightly different effects from the newspaper or magazine version of an image and its (usually) later (if not always) final expression in *The North American Indian*. For example, several of the pictures deployed in Curtis' 1909 article on pueblo-dwelling groups of the Southwest for *Scribner's* magazine, "Indians of the Stone Houses," present people veiled or swathed in clothes reminiscent of figures out of the Middle East, even the Holy Land itself. They include portraits, such as "Ah Pah of Taos" (1905), his brown face dramatized by being framed in white cloth, and the frequently reproduced "At the Old Well of Acoma" (1904), with its ceramic pots beside the still water of the cistern and its two women water carriers wearing and hidden in long, dark robes, as if in Purdah. In the actual Pueblo volume in which they appear (*Sixteen*, 1926), "Ah Pah" is rendered as "Tapa," but the images are otherwise identical. However, because they do not appear alongside a text that stresses the touristic potential of the Pueblos in the manner of the *Scribner's* piece (which concludes by urging readers to visit "the land of an ancient yet primitive civilization," 175) the almost frankly orientalist tenor to their visual discourse is much less apparent.⁷

But there are instances of images where the effects of separate publication are, precisely, at variance with effects in *The North American Indian*, whether the photographs in question are the same as or different to ones in *The North American Indian*. All of the images accompanying Curtis' extraordinary 1912 "interview" with Edward Marshall in *The Hampton Magazine*, "The Vanishing Red Man," seem, in that context, even more freighted with notions of Indians as a disappearing, racially doomed peo-

⁷ For discussion of Middle Eastern tropes in material on the Southwest, see Weigle 499-540.

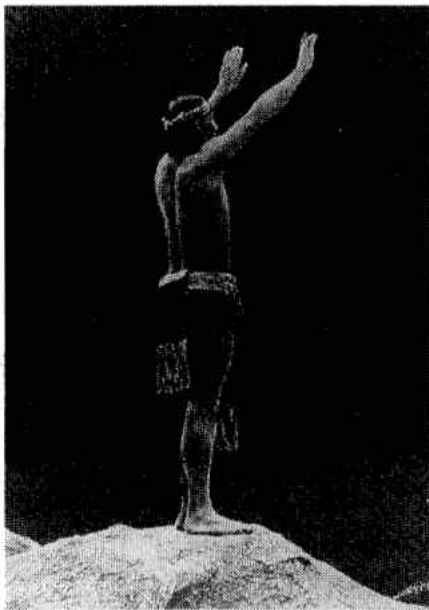
ple, than they do in *The North American Indian* itself. There isn't the space here to go into the ideology of the vanishing race. Here is one of Curtis' word-based formulations of it: "The Indian, one of the four Races of Man, is fast disappearing from the earth. In a few brief years he will be but a tradition." This sentiment was, of course, not unique to Curtis; it was a cultural assumption. William Henry Holmes, the artist, anthropologist and one-time Chief of the Bureau of Ethnology, wrote to Curtis: "Your idea is a grand one—the preservation for the far future of an adequate record of the physical types of one of the four races of men, a race fast losing its typical character and soon destined to pass completely away."⁸ Suffice it to say that the idea of the vanishing race was not only a common cultural assumption: it also became a *visual* trope.

We see it deployed by a host of photographers of Curtis' time. Indeed, perhaps the most poignant images of Indians as a vanishing race were not produced by Curtis, but by his stylistic imitator, Joseph Kossuth Dixon. Dixon worked on a series of "expeditions" funded by the heir to the Wanamaker department stores in Philadelphia and New York. In Dixon's "Sunset of a Dying Race" (after 1908; reproduced in Gidley, *A Hundred Years* 152), the befeathered horseman, his back to the viewer, is still—as any figure in a photograph must be—yet he is also in motion, moving away, from us, riding towards the effulgent circle in the sky, as if he will be taken *up* into the heavens. In Marshall's commentary on his interview we read that, at the outset of his project, Curtis "forthwith assumed the additional burden of the preparation of a document which should forever be a monument to the aborigines of North America." And the many famous Curtis images (several given new, unfamiliar titles) the interview displays—including "The Three Chiefs" (1900), "The Potter" (depicting Nampeyo, the great Hopi ceramicist, in 1906) and even "The Fisherman—Wishham" (1909), showing a powerfully built man outlined against the turbulent Columbia River—are made to seem not at all moments redeemed from the

⁸ Holmes, letter to Curtis, 9 March 1905. On the ideology of the vanishing race, see Dippie and Gidley, *Repeated Return*.

onrush of time, but items rescued from a time *already* passed: obituary photographs literally framed in black, as if their subjects were all long since dead.⁹

Contemporaneously with the first years of Morgan funding for the project, Curtis was also friendly with and an illustrator for the writer Marah Ellis Ryan, who produced two books that included Curtis Indian images different to those in *The North American Indian*, namely *Indian Love Letters* (1907) and *The Flute of the Gods* (1909). These were popular, sentimental and highly romanticized books, and the illustrations made for them were entirely in accordance with this description. One, "Signal Fire to the Mountain God" (c. 1909), an image purporting to show a Tanoan priest at his nightfall devotions, was also sent as a gift to potential subscribers. Like the Pictorialist Indian work of Curtis' contemporaries Roland Reed and,



E. S. Curtis, *Prayer to the Clouds*, 1909. Reproduced, with permission, from: *Contemporary Prints*.

even more, Dixon, there is something exaggerated about the image. Curtis probably recognized this and perhaps this was why—despite the fact that it featured in the Indian musicale that he mounted in 1911 at Carnegie Hall as the key opening stage in a series of magic lantern dissolves taking the audience through a night-long prayer vigil—it was not reprinted in the relevant volume of *The North American Indian*. "Prayer to the Stars" (c. 1909), an almost archly romantic picture apparently from the same sequence, must have a similar provenance.¹⁰

⁹ Further treatment of Dixon may be found in Trachtenberg, and Marshall 245. There is a certain irony in that the issue of *The Hampton Magazine* containing the Curtis "interview" proved to be the final one, as it then closed down without printing the promised second half of the interview.

¹⁰ For information on Ryan, including citations to her own work, see Gidley, *Curtis* 35n, 37, 292.

Like "Signal Fire," its effect—in keeping with its first uses in illustrative and dramatic contexts—is more emotional, less information-giving, than the majority of the images actually used in *The North American Indian*. (I will recall this picture when we look at prayer images actually from *The North American Indian* towards the end of this essay.) The key point is that a fuller contextualization of these images helps to explain their kind and status.

III

I have pointed out that the massive text of *The North American Indian* was the result of a *project*. In order to awaken public interest in it, to create a



Untitled photograph of Curtis in camp, photographer unknown, c. 1909. (Author's Collection.) The square tent to the right was used as Curtis' outdoor "studio."

climate in which subscriptions to the publication might be sold, the activities of the project were very highly publicized. For example, images of Curtis in camp—of which there were many—were circulated to the illustrated press. While they did not generally appear in the completed volumes of *The North American Indian*, they were used in newspaper publicity stories. A typical item so illustrated was headed "Lives 22

Years with Indians to Get their Secrets." A more accurate title would have been "Visits the Indians for 22 Years" because, except for months spent on the Crow reservation in Montana several times during the early years of the project, Curtis when in the field was constantly on the move; he did not live with any Indian people in the same way as, say the anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing had famously lived among the Zuñis. The project quite deliberately encouraged an image of Curtis as the intrepid adventurer



E. A. Schwinke, *Curtis Photographing in Kwakiutl Country*, 1912. (Author's Collection.)

in wild places and among the wild aboriginal denizens of the West.¹¹ Nevertheless, Curtis did have first-hand contact with Indians for over 30 years. This is the paradox: In the publicity for the project, it is as if the authenticity of the images, and even to the written text, is vouched for by Curtis' intense acquaintance with Indian life; yet, at the same time, it is noticeable that actual views of Curtis at work in the field—such as the picture Edmund August Schwinke, his assistant, made of him in Kwakiutl territory—were *not* included in *The North American Indian* itself. That is, *The North American Indian* tended to con-

ceal its own composition, as if to convey that it was in fact produced by human beings might reduce its imperial authority, so the image of Curtis the practicing photographer and anthropologist making a representation of his subjects was not allowed into the text.¹² But then again, when we look back at the enterprise as a whole, the rivulet of publicity pictures and the flood of imagery within the *The North American Indian* tend to flow together in an undivided stream. Indeed, in retrospect, all of this Curtis imagery tends to flow together, and that is why filtering is needed to recover the original categories to which it belonged.

Let us consider two pictures with this aim in mind. The first is "Cheyenne Girl" (1905). When the fieldwork among the Cheyenne took place in 1905, the Curtis party encountered a lot of hunger, even starvation, and they provided beef as a means of gaining good will and

¹¹ On this westering image of Curtis see Gidley, *Curtis*, chapter 6. For Cushing, see Green.

cooperation for their efforts to collect anthropological data and, especially, a selection of portraits and other views. William Washington Phillips, Curtis' nephew-by-marriage and his ethnological assistant at that time, just before Myers was appointed, dwelt in an unpublished memoir on the terrible conditions the party encountered. He described various forms of abjection and said, most aptly, "The Cheyenne were pictures of poverty." But you would never learn this from the actual images that Curtis made for—or, at least, the ones that he chose to reproduce in—*The North American Indian*. "Cheyenne Girl" is typical: her elaborate decorative bone breast plate may cover a very ordinary dress, and she appears slightly embarrassed by the attention she is being given, but she is plump-faced, and adorned in valued and valuable traditional accoutrements. Of course, as we know from discussion of other documentations of poverty, there can be a strong case for allowing subjects to present themselves with dignity, even if this means minimizing the signs, so to speak, of their privation. And it may be, as I will suggest with respect to others of Curtis' portraits, that this was the case here. But the written text of the Cheyenne volume argues otherwise: it concentrates on the Cheyenne past and Cheyenne folklore, not on the Cheyenne present and their problems with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which had failed to honor its obligation to provide beef rations. That is, the text as a whole was oriented to the Indian past, not towards the presentation of Indian grace under present pressure.¹³

The second picture—definitely oriented to the past—is one all too often deployed to claim that Curtis was some kind of charlatan: "In a Piegan Lodge" (1909). Christopher Lyman famously demonstrated that originally this image had shown a clock between the two figures, who sit in their tipi surrounded by their ceremonial items and the staple artifacts of traditional Blackfoot life. But we know that Curtis retouched away the clock only be-

¹² The prefaces to each volume of *NAI* are a partial exception to this rule, but they rarely offer sufficient specificity for the reader to witness the subject peoples in the process of change.

¹³ For more detailed coverage of the project's encounter with the Cheyennes, see Gidley, *Ways of Seeing*. For a discussion of dignity in documentary, see Stott 267-89.

cause he copyrighted the original image and his copyright print survives. Why copyright the image with the clock if he was not going to use it? I suggest that in its original form, like the Red Thunder postcard image, it was intended for another market—probably the one for pictures of Indians as curios. We know that Curtis catered for this market, in that his own studio, calling itself "the home of the American Indian," sold Indian artifacts and advertised itself as a kind of curiosity shop where, as well as getting your own portrait made by a distinguished studio, you could also view the Curtis Indian photographic series and examine typical basketry and blankets.¹⁴ What we do not know, and can only surmise from the surviving archive of imagery, is *how* specific images were categorized.

This is partly because we do not yet have a full enough understanding of how the photographic medium as a whole was configured during Curtis' time. Looked at in stylistic terms, Curtis, like Dixon, was obviously steeped in Pictorialism. Anyone can see at once, for example that his keynote image, "The Vanishing Race" (1904)—with its murky shadows in which we can just discern that the penultimate rider has turned in the saddle to look back, as if in regret—has



Fred Meyer, *Red Cloud and Others*, 1907. The figure standing to the left was the project's Crow assistant, A. B. Upshaw. (Courtesy Photography Collection, University of Washington Libraries.)

eschewed any claim to precision, any attempt at what one champion of the Photo-Secession's Pictorialism, Charles H. Caffin, castigated as "the niggling detail, the factual accuracy of sharp all-over *ordinary* photography," in favor of what Caffin termed "concentration, strength, massing of light and shade, breadth of effect" (qtd. in Doty 24). We can see Curtis' Pictorialism in relief if we look at a contrasting image by the amateur

¹⁴ See Lyman, esp. 82-83. For commentary on Curtis' trading activities, see Gidley, *Curtis*, chapter 3.

photographer Fred Meyer. Meyer's work is, clearly, "ordinary photography," as Caffin would see it, what at the time was usually called "record photography." His view of Red Cloud was taken two years later than Curtis' celebrated 1905 portrait of the aged and blind Sioux leader that I invoked near the beginning of this essay.

IV



J. C. Strauss, *Portrait of E. S. Curtis*, 1904. (Copy print, Author's Collection.)

One of Curtis' contemporaries, J. C. Strauss of St. Louis, made an interesting portrait of him in 1904 that may have something further to tell us about these categories then. Strauss depicts Curtis as a lookalike for the great Dutch painter Frans Hals. I think the reference is a double one: both artists were known for their portraiture, of course, but both also made picturesque genre studies, scenes of ordinary, everyday life. It was a winner of prizes for picturesque genre studies of local Coastal Salish Indians that Curtis first achieved national recognition.

Another picture shows another Curtis picturesque genre study, done in 1904, of Quentin, one of Theodore Roosevelt's children, trying to catch June bugs. We can see it replicated in the very tellingly titled "Nature's Blossom" (n.d.). In both images a kinship between childhood and nature is stressed, but the Indian child is actually called a blossom *of* nature.

In my earlier study I pointed out that the picturesque genre study as Curtis produced it was indebted to Peter Henry Emerson's representation of the landscapes and disappearing folk life of the Norfolk Broads, both in general style and in the composition of specific images.¹⁵ Emerson abjured the studio-based (sometimes composite) picturesque genre studies of his predecessor Henry Peach Robinson as too manipulated to be "natural"—

¹⁵ See Newhall.



E. S. Curtis, *Quentin Roosevelt Looking for June Bugs, Sagamore Hill, 1904.* (Courtesy Library of Congress.)



E. S. Curtis, *Nature's Blossom*, n.d. (Reproduced, with permission, from *Contemporary Prints*.)

and, indeed, it is sometimes forgotten that, while Emerson also bemoaned the pursuit of photographic "sharpness as an end in itself, he revered the "record" as much as Curtis later claimed to do. "Photographic pictures," he wrote, "may have one merit that no other pictures can ever have, they can be relied upon as historical records" (103). Emerson's "naturalism"—as he and others at the time in photographic circles called it—was complex. In some ways, it is comparable in its seeming contrarities to American literary naturalism as practiced by, say, Stephen Crane during the same period.¹⁶ Just as we know that Crane's naturalism was able to display elements of symbolism and even what some critics have called "impressionism," the photographic naturalism that Curtis inherited from Emerson was similarly a mixed mode. "Impressionism," for example, was a term Emerson also associated with his kind of naturalism. Thus, even though Curtis used the term "documentary," his naturalism was never meant to be documentary in a mid-twentieth-century sense, and for this reason Christopher Lyman's strident castigation of its "failure" to meet such documentary standards is misplaced. As A. D. Coleman, in discussing these issues, has suggested, we need to work towards a fuller understanding of the special kind of realism that Curtis practiced.¹⁷

¹⁶ The scholarship on Crane's visuality is too extensive to cite here.

¹⁷ For A. D. Coleman on Curtis, especially the connection to Emerson, see 132-158.

In many of Curtis' comments there is implicit advocacy of a symbolic interpretation of his photographs. "In the study of primitive man," he said in his *Museum Journal* essay, "the interest is more in his psychology than in his economics, more in his songs and prayers than in his implements. In fact, we study his implements that we may get light upon his mental processes" (*Plea* 164). This could merely express a preference for the mental over the material, but it is also a claim that the mental may be apprehended *through* the material. And we sometimes observe this substantiated not only by images, but by their captions. In "The Scout—Atsina" (1908), for example, we notice the blade of grass standing up from his hair, and the caption informs us that it is a symbolic remnant of the mass of grass a scout would traditionally have put on his head to hide himself in looking out over a hill. The very title of a picture of some Southern Yokuts pots laid out beside a gnarled tree is symbolically indicative: "Art Old as the Tree" (1923). The portrait of the "Nakoaktok Chiefs Daughter" (1914) has more subtlety: her high status in Kwakiutl society is represented by her platform seat being supported by two carved figures who, in turn, represent the lower servant caste. At the same time, though, the posture and sour "expression" on the carved figures seem almost to "mock" her own pose and pretensions.



E. S. Curtis, *The Sun Dancer*, 1907. The Caption for this image begins "As they dance, the performers never leave the spot on which they stand." Courtesy University of Exeter Library.

When we examine pictures actually depicting "songs and prayers" a symbolic reading is virtually inevitable. Our principal initial impression is that they are images of stasis, frozen moments: the supplicant, as in "The Sun Dancer" (1907) or "Invocation" (1908), is arrested at a mid-point in his devotions. This implies a larger narrative, and frequently that narrative is supplied in the writ-

ten text, just as, say, an image of an eagle-catcher could be made to complement an account of the eagle-catching process. But when we get an emphasis on arrested motion, the image also suggests that the process of vanishment could—at least in representation—be stopped in its tracks. Yet, paradoxically, these prayer pictures, such as "The Offering—San Ildefonso" (1925), are also instants out of time, as it were: mystical, transcendental moments. They are noticeably reverential—I would have to say beautiful images. It is in this sense that they are unlike the illustrative musicale pictures, such as "Prayer to the Stars", discussed earlier. These prayer images in *The North American Indian* may be as "staged," so to speak, as "Signal Fire" and "Stars," but they are quieter and, in a manner akin to Christian religious art throughout Western history, they themselves invite a kind of devotion. Curtis could not bring himself to see Indians as truly part of—certainly not constitutive of—the modern, bustling world. The final chapter of my Curtis study aimed to elaborate just how, and why, they were represented as Other. Yet, as I intimated even when I wrote that conclusion, the Native inhabitants of *The North American Indian* cannot simply be (or, better, utterly) consigned to the category of the Other. My view now is that Curtis sometimes came to a sort of middle point, and acknowledged what we might call Indian antecedents. In the 1912 Marshall interview, he even speculated on the good Indian characteristics that might have flowed into the new American "race" had widespread white/Indian intermarriage occurred: "We might have made of him [the Indian] a racial ingredient of inestimable value to us and the world, had we not . . . sentenced him to death" (253). In this respect, a parallel figure in the American twenties was the writer Mary Austin, who claimed that modernist American poetry could—and should—trace its lineage back to Amerindian forms.¹⁸ In effect, she and others like her, such as Carl Jung, propounded a kind of geographical determinism.¹⁹ This produced some interesting—and sometimes absurd—notions. One such was that skyscrap-

¹⁸ Relevant Austin writings include *Aboriginal* and, especially, *American Rhythm*.

¹⁹ See Jung.

ers were a logical and seamless progression from Pueblo multi-story dwellings. Another was that "American" faces would gradually become more Indian-like. We could say that to Curtis, as to Austin, Indians were—if I may borrow anthropologist Robert Heizer's neat phrase—"almost ancestors."²⁰ Predominantly Curtis continued to believe in the inevitable demise of Indian peoples—even in the 1912 interview. "The Indian," he said, "has accepted his dull fate with the grim stoicism of his race" (253).

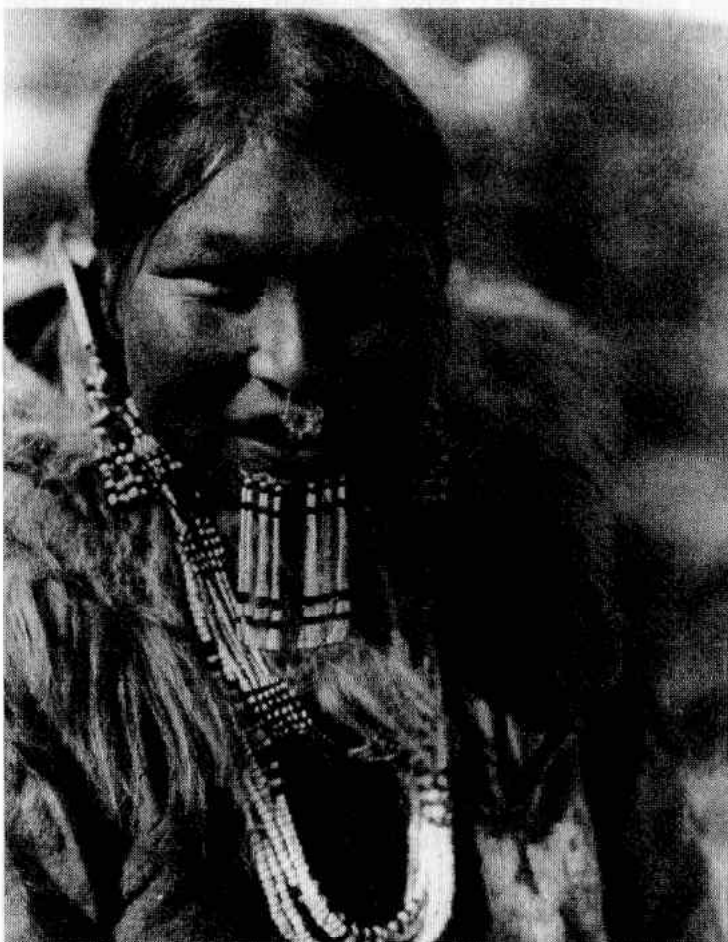
But, at the same time, at another level, Curtis probably intuited that this demise was not—and could not be the only story that could be told. And some of the images testify to this. At the most mundane level there are pictures such as "Modern Yurok Home" (1923). In my previous writing on Curtis I have stressed that when confronting California Indian cultures, such as the Yurok, which had been so terribly decimated, Curtis *had* to incorporate "modern" features if he was to photograph at all. But I have come round to thinking that another purpose of such an image was, precisely, to *register* the "loss" of typical Indian characteristics in shelter construction, as in everything else. But, of course, an image like this does not show "loss," or only "loss." It shows dynamic change, acculturation or what Mary Louise Pratt, in her book *Imperial Eyes*, calls "transculturation" in the "contact zone."²¹ Much more importantly, there are also many, many portraits that counter notions of vanishment by the power with which they evoke a consciousness of *being itself*.

I will mention just two, one male, the other female. "Two Strike" (1907) depicts a Brulé warrior leader whose biography, as it happens, was written up as part of the text to Volume Three (1908). My guess is that even before we read—or never read—that biography, with its account of colorful acts of bravery and the acquisition of worldly power, the image itself conveys a sense of an old man with *gravitas*, with much to look back upon, communicated by its introspective pose, strong highlights, and—if one is permitted to say something so essentialist—the definition of his fine features.

²⁰ The quotation is the title of his edited collection of California Indian photographs.

²¹ See Pratt.

"Kenowun" (Ill. 11; 1927), a close-up of a so-called Eskimo woman from Nunivak Island may be contrasted with the portrait of the young woman in "Holiday Trappings—Cayuse" (c. 1919) or even, "Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter," the Kwakiutl portrait described earlier. The caption tells us barely anything beyond her name (and, as it happens, the written text doesn't mention her by name), whereas in the cases of these other two there is much contextual information about them. On the other hand, what we gather from this information actually tells us not about them, but about their positions, their social *roles*. The image of Kenowun, on the other hand, gives us a *person*—very different, even *other*, with her facial ornamentation so alien to the modern western viewer—but a human being whose look registers her own self-awareness and impresses upon us her (still abiding) *presence*.



E. S. Curtis, *Kenowun*, 1927. Courtesy University of Exeter Library.

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DOUGLAS TALLACK

Painting the El: Visual Representations of the New York Elevated Railroad, 1890s—1930s

From the turn of the twentieth century the elevated railroad began to figure both prominently and tangentially in some paintings of New York City, having already been widely photographed and featured in early films of the city.¹ In considering the paintings of the Ashcan artists, Robert Henri, Everett Shinn and John Sloan, and then the work of John Marin, Max Weber and Charles Sheeler, however, we have the opportunity to explore an intriguing intersection between the subject matter of rapid transit and the formalities of representational and Modernist art.

In an oil-on-canvas painting of 1902, *Street Scene with Snow (57th Street NYC)*, Henri depicts a spur of the Sixth Avenue elevated railroad crossing 57th Street in the background, and becoming part of that New York scene. Although Henri's is a depiction of an affluent street, while Everett Shinn's *Cross Streets of New York* (1899) is of a Lower East Side street, the El figures and functions in a similar way in both paintings. For Barbara Weinberg and her co-curators, commenting on Henri's painting, "we are urged into the distance by the convergence of long lines of elegant four-story brownstones on either side of the wide thoroughfare" (Weinberg 12). Yet, compositionally, the El blocks the narrowing vista down a street—traditionally the image of Renaissance vision but updated in this case by an alliance between the camera and the receding tracks of the El in the many photographic representations of New York's elevated system. Where, in photographs of the elevated tracks cutting through the Bowery the new visual right of way leaves the streets and buildings to one side as it powers onwards, in *Street Scene with Snow (57th Street NYY)* the El inserts, in conjunction with other structures, a "back" to the painting, thereby en-

closing the space and making it something of a place rather than a space which is traversed on our way to the horizon. It is a place in which residents can walk and meet. In Shinn's *Cross Streets of New York* a man and a woman are talking or perhaps arguing but, whichever, the street is local rather than a thoroughfare. Shinn's traffic, in particular, seems very local, while his shops and Henri's church become integral to the partially enclosed spaces, seemingly catering to their needs. In one respect this is a surprising impression to receive because throughout the 1880s and 1890s many law-suits claimed that properties which abutted the elevated railroad had lost their value because of the noise, the dirty trains and the elevated structure itself which cut out some people's views and turned their houses into close-up views available from the El. In Shinn's charcoal drawing *Under the Elevated* (undated) the low angle presents an elevated railroad intruding upon and overshadowing a street scene and a group of cowed people, who are probably too poor to bring law-suits. But in *Cross Streets of New York* and the Henri painting the El is part of the scene, a convenient borderline. Although the snow, the rutted tracks in the streets, and the rather threatening sky disallow the idea that these are comfortable scenes, both paintings convey a sense of a peopled neighbourhood and, oddly enough, it is the materiality of buildings and structures which contribute to this impression. For all their interest in people, the Ashcan artists were hardly oblivious of the material components of visibility. With an obvious qualification it is tempting to say that the elevated railroad is an important part of the return of content to this city sight. Clearly, content does not return in the sense that there is more detail and information. Photographs—against which Ashcan art competed in general as well as in depicting the El—achieve this end much more successfully than either or any painting.² But content is there. In Henri and Shinn it is there as a thematic of community and place which is put into a relationship with the larger transportation system and its meaning for territorial communities. And—though it

¹ See Tallack.

² See Tallack.

is at once an oblique and an obvious point—content can only return through the enclosed form of both paintings.

This is not to say that Henri and Shinn are local colourists who are dismayed by, and turn their backs on, the wider city. For while the El contributes, perhaps surprisingly, to a sense of meaningful enclosure, it also suggests a lateral movement out of the immediate frame which complements the down-the-tracks movement conveyed by the photographic discourse of the El. Henri and Shinn depict the El in action, with trains crossing the streets, thereby emphasizing the location of the two streets within the larger grid-pattern of streets. Rebecca Zurier tells us that Shinn planned a picture album to be called *New York by Night* and, indeed, that "[*Cross Streets of New York*] was made for an article that conducted readers on an imaginary tour of Manhattan organized on the basis of interesting views to be found away from the major avenues" (71-72). This would suggest that Shinn, in company with other Ashcan artists, was seeking to know New York by modifying his primary interest in local scenes with an awareness of the need to map the city and explore its spatial relations, lengthways on the avenues and crossways on the streets. Even so, the right-angle selected by both Shinn and Henri makes it difficult fully to confront certain aspects of the El which are evident in the photographic discourse. Instead, they seek a reconciliation between the El and the local scene which "places" instances of rapid transit.

John Sloan's *Six O'Clock, Winter* of 1912 is different, even though he shares in the Ashcan School's interest in local, anecdotal scenes. *Six O'Clock, Winter* departs from the careful putting-in-place of the El in Shinn's *Cross Streets of New York* and Henri's *Street Scene with Snow* (57th Street NYC). In common with many photographs of the city taken between the 1880s and 1910s and also in two of his other paintings, *Election Night* and *Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street* (both 1907), *Six O'Clock, Winter* brings the elevated railroad nearer to the forefront of the scene; much as, in Lewis Mumford's account of urban-industrial growth, railroads in general are credited with or, according to Mumford, blamed for, an unparalleled concentration of human and material resources.

Except in certain parts of Europe where old-fashioned bureaucratic regulations happily kept the railroad stations at the outskirts of the historic city, the railroad was permitted, or rather, was invited to plunge into the very heart of the town. (524-25).

Sloan's perspective slants alongside the tracks and reveals the significance of a truly downtown version of the "metropolitan corridor" which John Stilgoe analyses in its many manifestations across the nation (ix). Sloan's title evinces a similar effort to generalize from the particular. His painting of an elevated train amidst rush-hour crowds draws on the character of a New York evening rush-hour just fourteen years after the incorporation of the boroughs: both the frenetic character of the rush-hour and the sense that while the train and tracks are central they are yet taken for granted by the people milling around the station. One consequence of the rush-hour, in Oscar Handlin's words, was "a new conception of time" because

the arrival of all those integers who worked together, from whatever part of the city they inhabited, had to be coordinated to the moment. . . . arbitrary beginnings and ends had to be set, made uniform and adhered to. (25)

Sloan's title, then, is precisely about arbitrariness, the end, for commuters, of a working day which has no natural end. The sheer excess which Sloan paints—people in a rush, different forms of transportation, multiple sources of light, and so on—arises, paradoxically, from the rational establishing of, as Handlin puts it, "arbitrary beginnings and ends" within the impersonal schedules of the rush-hour. The largely optimistic outlook upon the city which Sloan possessed, according to his most recent biographer, no doubt helped him to bring together the local and the general.³ There is purpose in the jam-packed scene. Traffic lights control a street trolley, deliveries are handled, and the homebound people rely on, even if they seem not to look directly at, the El. To bring these observations on Sloan's painting together, there is an infrastructural as well as a localised vision at work but—in contrast to most of the photographs of the elevated—Sloan is interested in the conjunction of system and people. This dual focus roughly corresponds with the "above" and "below" sections of

³ See Loughery.

Six O'Clock, Winter but is less a structural than a painterly issue. When Sloan seeks to represent the modern city he opts for a peopled system and, in ways that are relevant to the formal dimension of any visual regime, this also means a "painted" system. Wherever we look in *Six O'Clock, Winter* content keeps getting painted—awkwardly painted—even as the system is being implied. The dark paint used to depict the stanchions and the tracks retains the detail of iron fretwork, while the faces remain individual almost to the vanishing point of perspective. As we approach the canvas and look more and more intently at, say, the woman in the bottom right-hand corner, the paint retains its relationship to representation almost until the last. This is quite unusual given the modernist subject matter: rush hour, the loss of light in a winter's evening, and the train and tracks.

These observations on brushwork will carry more weight when we look at contributions to the visual regime made by modernist art in which painterly marks often, in T. J. Clark's words, "do their job of representing in a way which barely makes sense" (20). There is little in Sloan of the blankness of expression which was already a staple of European and some American city art and which suggests an ambiguous association between commodification and abstraction. Nor does Sloan's painting seek a formal equivalence with an abstract concept, such as speed, circulation, movement, or energy, among others. Detail works against this kind of unity. But Sloan's effort to maintain a connection between paint and representation has some relevance to a key question provoked by the subject matter of the El, namely how to represent a system. Almost until the point of pure materiality, the paint refuses *not* to add up; refuses the blankness which is the end-result of the sequence of substitutable units in any system. There are surprisingly few painterly ellipses; perhaps only in the bottom left area where Sloan paints the distant spaces under the station structure. In Sloan's painting, the technique seeks to counter the empty circulation of passengers—the commodities of rapid transit—which informs much of the photographic discourse of the El, where people are noticeable for their absence, their inconspicuousness or their merely representative function.

The wider import of painterly marks on a canvas can be generalized further to underline the theoretical connection between urban knowledge and medium-specific representation; here, "painting the El." Sloan and, to a lesser extent, Henri and Shinn seek ways of representing a system. However, as more self-conscious Realists than the many photographers of the elevated railroad and other city sites, they seek also to maintain a connection with that which, in one way or another, is believed to lie outside any system. In other words, they sought to restore content but without a didactic message; which, of course, is what Realism seeks to achieve and was the crux of the disagreement which Sloan had with colleagues at *The Masses* over "political art." In *Six O'Clock Winter*, the train is at once an object of attention and a sign of something else, that which it is part of. But the purity of the system of exchange in the system of rapid transit keeps being interrupted. The tracks certainly impact upon the older surrounding buildings but they do not erase them; the most insistent source of light in the painting comes from the ground-floor shop windows. And although the angle which Sloan adopts has the effect of centring the elevated train and its tracks it also opens up the street and the foreground occupied by the rush hour crowd. It is a fairly individuated crowd as well, with elements of anecdote, notably the man handling the large package who is quite startlingly framed by the red uprights and roof of the cart though not entirely enclosed by these lines: to the right his action continues past the upright and he comes out from the crowd below. When individuality disappears or anecdotal narrative is interrupted there are material reasons for this—principally, the interruption of vision by other people. Sloan is interested in the individuality of the crowd while also drawn to its collectivity and its relationship to impersonal systems of transit and circulation.

Although in many respects John Sloan and other Ashcan artists differ sharply from their contemporaries, the American Impressionists, there are similarities which, briefly noted, assist in marking off a further dimension of the visual discourse of rapid transit: the interest taken in it by early American Modernist and, to varying degrees, abstract artists. Of all the American Impressionists Childe Hassam took most interest in rapid transit

and at least five of his works include the elevated railroad. *The El, New York* (1894) is an unusually forthright representation compared with the indistinct urban contours in his more famous urban paintings, *Winter in Union Square* (c. 1890) and *Washington Arch, Spring* (1890). Ilene Susan Fort isolates *The El, New York* as the painting in which "Hassam seemed most in awe of American engineering feats" (xii). The prominence given to the El and the angle selected for the painting suggest a limited comparison with Sloan in *Six O'Clock, Winter*, notwithstanding how much the two artists diverge in other respects, not least in their politics. In *The El, New York* Hassam succeeds, as Sloan does, in getting alongside the elevated and conveying something of the tempo and immediacy of the rapid transit moment. Yet, there is an aspect of modernity—its increasingly abstract, systematic character—which is evident in the more pervasive photographic discourse of the elevated railroad but which neither Hassam nor Sloan pursue. It might be more accurate to say that they *could not* pursue abstraction given their techniques—or at least certain similarities in their brushwork—and their (different) social orientations, Hassam concerned about the standardization of modern life because it undermined a leisure-class outlook and Sloan because it had the potential to dominate people even as it liberated them.

If there is one dominant impression to be gained from the many photographs of the El it is the repetitive, serial quality of the elevated line and its overall system. The seriality, above all, is evident, whereas in the Ashcan artists and the Impressionists the impulse towards seriality is interrupted by other concerns and a different viewpoint. In Sloan but even more in Robert Henri and Everett Shinn the point of view of the neighbourhood intervenes, while in another of Hassam's El paintings, *Flags on the Friar's Club* (1918), the El in the background blocks off the rest of the street but does not otherwise impact upon the reserved, traditional street. Seriality is also not an option for Impressionist and Ashcan artists because it is simply not representable through their painterly techniques: respectively, the preference for a "blurring" style and the broad application of paint, often on top of a canvas neutrally pre-painted (the "soup" technique), which Henri

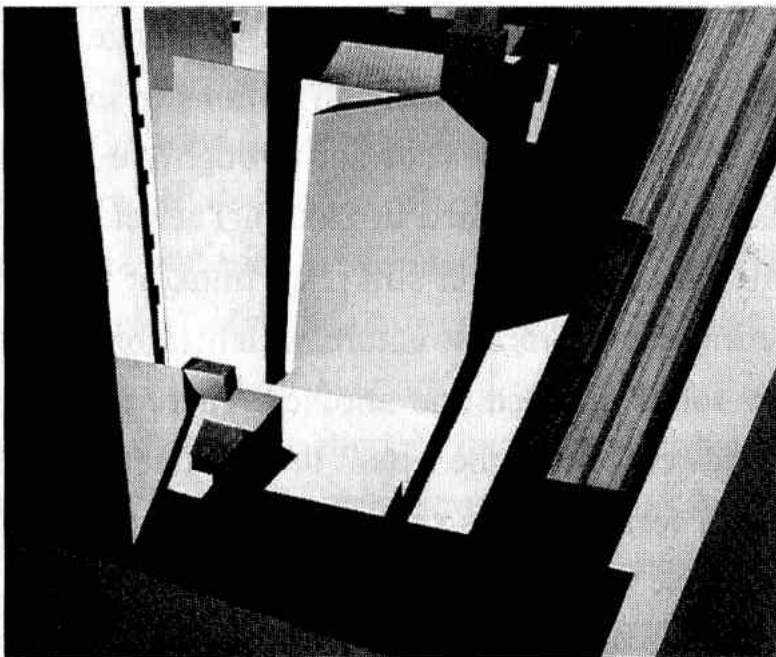
pioneered among his group. Sloan includes plenty of detail, such as the ironwork and the expressions on faces in *Six O'Clock Winter*, but he does not attempt to represent repetition. Although the El runs down the streets in that painting and in *Election Night* and *Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street*, the angled and fairly close-up point of view adopted prevents any obvious aligning of the tracks with a larger image of the street-grid. And by the time of *The City from Greenwich Village* (1922), which does take more of an overview, Sloan identifies the El with an older city and depicts it twisting around the Village streets rather than racing up or down town, this, again, being a feature of photographs of the El. Sloan is certainly interested in the underlying system but particularity keeps being asserted, with the result that *Six O'Clock, Winter* as well as Hassam's *The El, New York* possess the one-off, momentary feel which probably stems from Monet's Gare Saint Lazare paintings of the 1870s and the attempts to catch time and movement, as defined by light and as experienced by a passing observer of city life. In *Six O'Clock, Winter* and *The El, New York* content is stubbornly painted in the face of the necessary systematizing of rapid transit and the disciplining of vision in the photographic record, both of which were making the representation of content much less straightforward. In a curious way, the elevated trains in most of Sloan's paintings and in Hassam's *The El, New York* are (whether heroically or naively) going somewhere, whereas the line in the everyday photographs of rapid transit is part of an invisible enclosed system which determines the line of the line, as it were. A new self-consciousness about form and representation would be needed to visualize the invisible, though the outcome—as the orthodox histories of modernist abstraction tell us—was potentially a turning away from the representable world towards the art-object.

Rapid transit in Hassam's Impressionism and Sloan's Realism is accorded a distinctive modern quality but at the expense of a different conception of modernity as abstractly formal. This conception of what Cecelia Tichi so aptly terms the "rapid transit moment" (248) is articulated in such works of abstract Modernism as Max Weber's *New York* (1913) and *Rush-Hour, New York* (1915), Charles Sheeler's *Church Street El* (1920), John

Marin's *Lower Manhattan* (1920), and Stuart Davis' *Sixth Avenue El* (1931). The work of these early American Modernists tends to be an implied footnote to the story authoritatively told by Clement Greenberg in his 1965 essay, "Modernist Painting." That story is of the flattening of illusionist space into pattern as modern art heroically explored all of its formal options and embraced autonomy and not the world. Treated this way, though, abstraction would have little to say about the rapid transit moment as we have been historically situating it because a strong drive in abstract art is to seek transcendence through the pure form (Fer 11). Greenberg's orthodoxy cannot be ignored because it provides an indispensable language of critical description for many abstract paintings but it should not monopolize the analysis. For whatever else it is abstraction is integral to modernity and has one of its sources in the ways in which key modern elements of the city were becoming visually known. An observation by Briony Fer about modern art turns out to be very helpful in grasping the tendency towards abstraction in the rapid transit moment. Abstraction, according to Fer, "focuses attention on the question of temporality, or the way time relates to serial imagery and sequences of forms" (11). The photographic discourse of the elevated railroad—to which Charles Sheeler, in particular, returned in his efforts to depict the El—emphasizes rational geometry and the idea that once any system is even partially abstracted then, from the resulting image or even detail of an image, that totality can be invisibly reconstructed, whether through notions of infinite growth, serial repetition or essential attributes (but not through the narrative or "getting there" impulse we have discerned in Sloan). The relevance of Fer's definition of abstraction becomes clearer still if we think of images of empty tracks, whose repetitions contain a structure which informs the static image and foretell how forms succeed one another. There is, here, some gravitating of form towards content to the extent that abstraction and system are both fictional or as-if forms and, as such, are equally invisible. Curiously, this proves to be the link with photography.

Walter Benjamin famously refers to "the optical unconscious" in his "A Short History of Photography" (203). While he is not specifically advanc-

ing a materialist position on photography, his insight provokes the thought that the routine photographs of the elevated railroad do gesture towards material explanations for the invisibility of modernity. Abstraction is part of the material city as it undergoes modernization and in photographs of local scenes of rapid transit there is an implied systematizing of the wider city. Although the reference is not to New York or any one city, Robert Smithson succinctly expresses the change in question: "The old landscape of naturalism and realism is being replaced by the new landscape of abstraction and artifice" (qtd. in Perloff xviii). The irony in reading the photographic discourse of the El in this way is that, in the story of aesthetic Modernism, photography's claims on the real proved to be one of the provocations for the Modernist turn towards abstract art; in an American context this meant a turn away from the efforts of the Ashcan artists. And, admittedly, the dominant mimetic impulse behind the kind of photography which made the elevated railroad its subject mostly curtailed further enquiry into abstraction, some experiments with abstract photography notwithstanding. Importantly, though, the realism of the photograph did not prevent Modernist painterly abstraction capitalizing upon the occurrence, in the rapid transit moment, of the systematic sequence repeatable along what Ezra Pound called a "speed-line" (224). In so doing, Modernism contributed importantly to visual knowledge of the city.



Charles Sheeler, 1883-1965.
Church Street El, 1920. Oil
 on canvas, 40.6 x 48.5 cm.
 © The Cleveland Museum
 of Art, 2001, Mr. And Mrs.
 William H. Marlatt Fund,
 1977.43.

Charles Sheeler's one urban transit painting, *Church Street El* of 1920, relates very directly to photography and also to the short film, *Manhatta*, made with Paul Strand earlier that year. However, the special contribution which *Church Street El* makes to the visual regime of rapid transit depends, finally, upon a move away from the film and its stills, both of which inspired the painting (some stills from *Manhatta* later appeared in *Vanity Fair* in 1922). In *Church Street El* Sheeler employs an angled top-down perspective from the Empire Building and the result is the most severe set of geometric lines in any of his works and an almost-abstract pattern. (It hardly needs saying that by the time of *Church Street El*, Sheeler had entirely broken with his mentor, the Impressionist, William Merritt Chase.) Had the perspective been fully top-down, rather than at a steep angle, the signs of depth would have disappeared entirely, notably the one instance of decorative detail on the steeple of the Sexton's Office. As it is, *Church Street El* is a radically upright and therefore flattened version of the many photographs from earlier in the El's history which portray the tracks running at an angle beside buildings. An abstract tendency is further reinforced in Sheeler's painting by the gridded windows on the building to the left, the lines on a roof, and, especially, the lines of track, all examples of the geometric repetition which governs much of the work. It is worth adding that away from the compression of space and the distortion of point of view brought about by New York's vertical angularity, Sheeler tended to use railroad tracks differently. In *American Landscape* (1930) and *Classic Landscape* (1931) the greater—though still stylized—Realism arising from a more traditional photographic perspective results in a still landscape. In both paintings the railroad tracks only emphasize linearity.

In *Church Street El*, however, the more Sheeler tends towards the abstract, thereby reducing the possibilities for simple linear movement, the more dynamic the increasingly irregular visual space becomes. The meaning of dynamic movement is apparent if *Church Street El* is compared with *Manhatta*, its chief source. In one sequence in the film we look down on the same scene as in *Church Street El*. Details are not too difficult to identify: for example, the switching track and the pedestrians below and to the

left of the tracks. Moreover, an elevated train literally moves diagonally from top to bottom. Yet the movement of the train in *Manhatta* is no more than that. This is in accord with the argument, advanced by Jan-Christopher Horak, that *Manhatta's* reputation as America's first avant-garde film is tempered by quite traditional points of view, by a narrative and by elements of closure when, in the final section, we look towards the romantic sunset over Staten Island, just as, in the opening images, we look from that direction towards Manhattan (8-15). In *Church Street El*, in contrast, movement is created abstractly by perspectival inconsistencies but within a single location as well as within a single pictorial space. Interestingly, the perspectival inconsistencies center on the elevated railroad. The hints of depth in the roof and steeple of the Sexton's Office initially corral most elements in the painting into a coherent, if mostly flattened, visual space: the skyscraper to the left has windows which orient it towards other buildings, some in front and some behind the Sexton's Office, and the space between the buildings also appears. However, the elevated railroad refuses to conform to even this semblance of a coherent space because the individual tracks do not narrow and therefore neither does the whole track structure. Consequently, where the buildings "move" downwards to the bottom left corner (they lack the "tops" which would help them "soar"), the elevated remains isolated to the right, apparently on the same plane as the ground beneath it. In *Manhatta* the elevated railroad is integrated into the rest of the scene and the perspective is entirely coherent throughout. The sense of movement in the painting, therefore, is excessive to anything which could be created within a traditional, one-point perspective: the tracks are not patently going somewhere and taking the train. Instead, as Carol Troyen and Erica Hirshler have argued, movement arises from the disjunction in the formal visual order of the painting and this implicates the viewer, arguably at the expense of the subject matter. They quote Sheeler to this end: "The plunging perspective [was] . . . deliberately chosen, Sheeler claimed, to 'include the spectator . . . give him importance'" (80). The viewer becomes important as his or her perception of the space is

undermined and as the rationalist geometry generates excess rather than ensuring uniformity.

Perceptual involvement in the visual space of rapid transit is more marked in Max Weber's *New York* (1913), less because of the deliberate abandonment of representational space which occurs between *Church Street El* and its source scene in *Manhatta* and more because Weber draws dramatically on the experience of being speedily on the move but in the static medium of painting. *New York* is one of a number of works painted after Weber's return to New York City in 1909 and for some eight or nine years his paintings easily competed with the work of John Marin and also Joseph Stella as the most significant painterly engagement with dynamic urban space. Certainly, he was fascinated by the rapidly changing cityscape and its coincidence with a Cubist-Futurist treatment. He did not become a Futurist and was much less influenced in this respect than Stella, but the Futurists' interest in the intersection of technology and the "moment" gelled, for Weber, with the incessant movement within a Cubist visual environment of angles and impossible planes which gave him a lens with which to see downtown New York. The results are most evident in his two paintings most directly concerned with transportation: *New York*, and *Rush-Hour, New York*. Important as is this art-historical delineation of Weber's Cubist-Futurist amalgam, his paintings are also part of the by-then quite heterogeneous visual discourse of rapid transit inaugurated by photography. Painting—but of an explicitly Modernist kind with Max Weber—re-conceives rapid transit in ways that relate to but differ from the conceptions which come with the more representational art of the Ashcan School, with photography and with film.

For its date, 1913—the same year in which the Armory Show at last brought Modernism to parts of the United States—Weber's *New York* is an extraordinarily mobile painting, primarily vertical but with competing angled skyscrapers, some obeying the dominant narrowing orientation but others going their own way. The top-down perspective which gives us the "octopus" of Madison Square—made similarly visible in Alvin Langdon Coburn's photograph, *The Octopus*, of the previous year—will not hold for

the major foreground "skyscraper" which we see almost side-on. And then there are the "snakes" which introduce curves into the predominately angular painting. Dominic Ricciotti has, quite reasonably, identified the elongated shapes which "snake" across the surface of *New York* as elevated trains, and even refers, for partial corroboration, to the snake bend at Coenties Slip ("Revolution" 53; "City Railways" 131-32, 144). Yet these "snakes" seem to enter tunnels and, because of the Cubist breaking up of the picture plane, it is also difficult to determine whether they pass "behind" or "in front" of the compressed and tilted skyscrapers. Weber, himself, is reported as referring to the "Subway influence" upon *New York* (McBride n. pag.). However, we risk missing the point of Weber's Modernism by getting too embroiled in trainspotting and the particularities of what is being directly represented: elevated or subway transit. His retention of locational or spatio-temporal titles, in the face of the increasing irrelevance of titles as an important strand of Modernism pursued its quest for autonomy, indicates a wish to maintain a tangible connection with the city.

Arguably, though, in *New York* and *Rush Hour, New York*, Weber is chiefly interested in seeing and explaining the city's conceptual processes: rush-hour and rapid transit. It is the *concept* of being "in transit" and the *concept* of "the rush hour" which take prominence and so in *New York* Weber has to try out what was, in the United States, a new visual language of simultaneity. Sheeler, we have seen, adapts and works off the photographic image and does not make the jump to conceptual thinking about movement and process. The blankness of the walls in *Church Street El* can, of course, be interpreted as signifying a dehumanized urban outlook, and Karen Lucic enlists Simmel's concept of the "metropolitan type" to support this reading (61-63). Dickran Tashjian is probably closer to the mark when he observes that Sheeler thought "abstraction . . . could be achieved simply by following representational motifs" (216). As for the Ashcan artists and, to a lesser extent, American Impressionists such as Childe Hassam, their orientation towards content made it difficult to represent the kinds of ideas or concepts which the city was, in effect, inventing

or redefining. Admittedly, as we have noted, there is a determined effort to connect part and whole, local and general scene, in John Sloan and also in Everett Shinn. And in photography and film, where the mimetic charge is so strong—Modernist work notwithstanding—the images of an empty track have a wider connotation but this is as far as it goes; arguably, as far as it *can* go. "Photography," Sheeler states, "has the capacity for accounting for things seen in the visual world with an exactitude for the differences which no other medium can approximate" (qtd. in Tashjian 216). But what Weber's abstract Modernism brings is an effort to see time and place together, to find a visual language for the most pressing urban concepts: speed, system and so forth. Weber accepts speed and takes it to a point which exceeds even the effort in film to find a mobile point of view from which to picture modernity.

In Wolfgang Schivelbusch's words from *The Railway Journey*, "Transport technology is the material base of potentiality, and equally the material base of the traveler's space-time perception" (44). To this end, Weber amalgamates distinct elements of that material environment: tracks, tunnels, the striking buildings in the downtown corridor, but no trains or people. Trains, for Weber, seem to suggest only the content rather than the effects of movement. Even in *Rush Hour, New York*, in which Weber comes in close to the activity in a central station or terminal, we do not see the trains but the signs of movement. In Ricciotti's precise account: "Weber recreates through a pattern of sharp angles and zigzags the sequential motions of braking, acceleration, and velocity" (*City Railways* 132). As for the absence of people, the human dimension is incorporated into the process of seeing so that in *New York* the city of tall buildings is seen while on the move and becomes the painterly equivalent to the "machine ensemble" which Schivelbusch fastens upon as peculiar to railroad travel in general and which he defines as the inseparability of vehicle and location/point of view. The overall impression is of a montage of images of multiple locations. These are similar to those which present themselves while on the move in an American Mutoscope and Biograph Company film of 1903, *Elevated Railroad, New York* and also in other contemporary

films of the El;⁴ the difference is that in Weber's painting the images have been combined in the same picture space. The issue of whether Weber is painting overground or underground movement is superseded by the fact of movement within a space and it is this which possibly explains why Weber exaggerates the curves in the elevated or subway system. The lines can then wind around and to some degree enclose the cityscape rather than cut through it in a linear manner—whether above or below ground. Because of its radically Modernist engagement with the modernity of rapid transit *New York* is best described as an abstract work in which there is no retreat into optical autonomy. Instead, in Andrew Benjamin's words, there is an "enactment of specific reinaugurations" (53) as "events" "occur" within the time/space continuum of rapid transit.

By 1913, the date of Weber's *New York*, and certainly by 1920 and Sheeler's *Church Street El*, the El's role in photographic and the more traditional painterly representations of New York City created little sense of dynamism or modernistic transitoriness. There is even surprisingly little of these qualities in the moving images in Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta*. The El had become part of the background, slipping into the kind of figure/ground relationship which is central to representational art. In Raymond Williams' terms the once emergent and dominant features of the El have become residual (121-27). In Weber and Sheeler, though, any figure/ground order of priority is patently refused and so the rapid transit moment might be said to have passed into abstract form but retained a dynamism and an openness which neither Greenbergian abstraction nor a Taylorized perception offers. The difficulty in deciding whether rapid transit in *New York* is over- or under-ground is precisely the point. The material fact of rapid transit has been re-conceptualized as a qualitatively different image of urban speed and spectacle. Equally, though, what we have in *New York* works back against a standard understanding of abstraction as the extraction of pure form at the expense of representational content. John Lechte's revision of the Greenbergian theme is apposite:

⁴ See Tallack 106-08, and American Mutoscope and Biograph Company.

"Abstraction is the condition of possibility of every possible set," he writes, and he goes on to propose that "abstraction is simultaneously 'full' and 'empty'. It is potentially ready to accept new contents, but is never definable in terms of those contents" (25-26). This re-interpretation of abstraction helps us to see Weber's *New York* and Sheeler's *Church Street El* as important perspectives upon the systemic character of modernity and therefore as *forms* of urban knowledge. There are differences, though. Weber's paintings have a remarkable excessive and transitory quality to them; Sheeler's painting is more troubling. In the context of his career, *Church Street El* can be read as a warning against the autonomy of both abstraction and system, though this seems not to have been a warning which Sheeler, himself, heeded as his career moved, by the 1930s, to a preoccupation with isolated, fetishized machine images and an inappropriate design aesthetic for the Great Depression, or towards *View of New York* (1931), an extraordinary work in which the disappearance of any signs of the city through the open window of his studio suggests that abstraction can be an abdication of urban understanding, an acquiescence in the unintelligibility of the city.

The rapid transit "moment" of the elevated railroad lasted about sixty years and this passing of time significantly affected its visual discourse without necessarily determining it. There can still be a "moment" in the sense of enactment, as delineated by Cecelia Tichi. But history does make a difference to vision and just as the initial construction of elevated tracks all over the city was itself an historical event so it follows that the identity of the El itself was subject to change. As the El became a familiar part of the city's visual discourse so the new world of skyscrapers and the almost invisible subway defined the trains and particularly the track structure as the "old." By way of a conclusion we can briefly trace this process back, with the help Sadakichi Hartmann's essay "A Plea for the Picturesqueness of New York" (1900). Considered in its own time, Hartmann's essay endeavoured to shift American art and literature away from its rural themes and it therefore supported the efforts of Ashcan artists and photographers, such as Alfred Stiegliz, who resisted pictorialism:

For many years I have made it my business to find all the various picturesque effects New York is capable of—effects which the eye has not yet got used to, not discovered and applied in painting and literature, but which nevertheless exist. Have you ever watched a dawn on the platform of an elevated railroad station when the first rays of sun lay glittering on the rails. (59)

Looking back, though, his call for an urban-industrial aesthetic prepares the way for the El—in this instance—to become a subject for Realism; then self-conscious Realism; then Modernist abstraction; and, finally, as conditions changed, the object of nostalgia. In *Six O'Clock, Winter* John Sloan is so involved in the dynamics of the city that isolating the picturesque scene from the fabric of the city is not a priority. But in his 1922 painting, *The City from Greenwich Village*, the El figures as part of the older city, helping to circle and enclose the Village while the lights of the spectacular downtown signal the excitement of the future. And Sloan's sketch, *Snowstorm in the Village* (1925), portrays an elderly elevated train buffeted by winds and snow and—because of the high angle selected—seeming to creep between buildings which dominate it. It would honestly not be surprising to discern a face on the front of this most put-upon little train. Nostalgia is more hesitantly present in Louis Lozowick's lithograph, *Subway Construction*. By 1931, the date of Lozowick's work, some elevated lines had already been closed and the artist selects a point of view along the line of the "roof" of a new subway under construction, the nearest he can get to an above-ground angle on the route of a subway. The echoes of track-line photographs of the elevated from thirty years earlier are very clear. A solitary figure walking along a road and some buildings are to the left of the construction and, crossing the subway bed on a trestle in the distance but no longer part of the space—as it is in Henri's *Street Scene with Snow (57th Street NYC)* or Shinn's *Cross Streets of New York*—is an elevated train.

Realism, with its familiar figure/ground organization of space, is more susceptible to changing historical conditions than Modernism. By 1920 and John Marin's *Lower Manhattan* the El could not be portrayed as transcending the confusion of the city streets as it is in some of the

photographs and, to a degree, in Sloan's *Six O'Clock, Winter*, which shares a similar diagonal structure with Marin's painting. In 1913, a year after Sloan's painting, the Woolworth Building—which appears in Marin's painting—and its generation of downtown skyscrapers began to dwarf the structure of the elevated. However, Marin's abstract technique, together with the compositional freedom which watercolours gave him, allow him to up-date the El. The precise shape of train and track structure which seemed so dynamic in the late nineteenth century but which looks out-moded in Sloan's two Greenwich Village works gets rescued from the tender trap of nostalgia by Marin's Modernism. Marin's El is blurred. It merges with more modern lines and shapes and, once again, it cuts through the cityscape into the heart of downtown. Although their techniques and materials were different Marin and Weber's efforts to catch the conceptual forces in New York re-incorporate the elevated railroad into the cityscape, by-passing the notational detail of Sloan which, over time, rendered the El open to nostalgia.

The process of formalising the El as part of the Modernist project can lead to the blankness of abstraction but—as in Marin but particularly in Weber—can also offer access to knowledge about abstraction as a facet of modernity. Stuart Davis's *Sixth Avenue El* (1931) is a final example of what Modernism can achieve. He appears to use the El as a partial frame but the collage-like structure resists the desire for perspective, for a vista. *Sixth Avenue El* is a print so there is not much more material heterogeneity than in a photograph but we are provoked by Davis's techniques to mix up the El's pillars and the other images or fragments of images. The oversized woman's face, the lamp, the ticket machine, and the sections of elevated architecture inhabit each other's space. Davis's visual theorizing of this space of commodities and signs (not a lot distinguishes these two categories in Davis' work) proposes a different logic besides that of the old (Sixth Avenue El) and the new (advertising images). There is no easy recourse to nostalgia in a work which lacks a clear figure/ground relationship. And, consequently, there is less chance that a historical perspective will be lost, consigned to the past, as in Ogden Nash's sentimental tribute:

Oh El, thy era is o'er;
 I am glad that thou are no more;
 But I'd hold myself lower than ditt
 Weren't I glad that once thou wert. (118)

Stuart Davis uses a collage-like technique to bring to the final stages of the visual regime of rapid transit an awareness of ways in which residual, dominant and emergent elements interact in the present.

Works Cited

This essay is part of a longer piece of research on representations of the New York El. For the sake of internal coherence, there is a small measure of overlap between the present essay and the essay listed below. The author would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Board for assistance in completing the research for this essay.

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Projecting Images: Modernist Iconologies

HEINZ ICKSTADT

A Literature of the Eye: The Image and the Moving Image in Modern American Literature

I

Can we speak of American literary modernism as of a literature of the eye? Or would it not be equally appropriate to describe its "obsession with the visual" as a transcendence, or even a deconstruction of the eye? Although the dominant interpretations of Anglo-American modernism (Kenner's or Greenberg's, for instance) have emphasized the visual and insisted on the importance of the image, the denigration of the eye in contemporary theory which Martin Jay traced in his *Downcast Eyes* has made such "modernist fetishization of sight" (Krauss in Jay 161)—by authors as well as critics—problematical. "If Greenberg's formalist version of the modernist privileging of the visual were the whole story," Jay writes, "we would be confronted with the paradox that the antivisual discourse of the 20th century was utterly at odds with the dominant artistic practice of the same era" (160). Accordingly, in his impressive reinterpretation of modern American poetry, *Painterly Abstraction*, Charles Altieri seems to take the literary text out of the rhetorical context of perception ("a demodded perceptual order") altogether. By discussing it in terms of a constructivist aesthetic, Altieri sees poetry and painting as allies in an effort aimed at overcoming a Romantic ideology that saw subject and object, self and nature as precariously held together by the eye.

On the other hand, it is beyond dispute that the literature of American modernism is indeed steeped in a rhetoric of image and perception. In fact, it would seem rather easy to argue that literary modernism is a response to, as much as it is a symptom of, the massive proliferation of the visual in the culture of modernity, the pervasive presence of images ("a frenzy of the

visible"), generated on all levels by new image-making media. In his introduction to a volume of essays on *Visual Culture*, Chris Jenks points out that "the senses have, through modernity, become inflated indicators of the real, but none more so than vision" and that "modernity's project "was most effectively achieved through the privileging of 'sight;' that modern culture has "elected the visual to the dual status of being both the primary medium for communication and also the sole ingress to our accumulated symbolic treasury. The modern world is very much a 'seen' phenomenon" (2). Although the power of the eye to see clearly, or precisely, or objectively through all smokescreens of ideological, rhetorical, or irrational obfuscation has been a highly persuasive myth of liberation through an enlightenment relating the clarity of sight to that of mind, its very dominance—increasingly reinforced by instruments capable of seeing everything—has greatly reduced its charm and revealed its inherent oppressiveness. With reference to Foucault, Jenks and Jay argue that the "scopic regime" of modern Western culture (Jay 150) is, in effect, a system of surveillance which goes hand in hand with "a realist form of representation." In the theoretical aftermath of modernism, there is thus "a conscious recognition of the constructive relation between our visual practices and our visual culture." So that certain critics, like Marx Wartofsky, see human vision itself as artifact, produced by other artifacts: "it is an historically variable mode of perception, which changes with changes in our modes of representation" (Wartofsky 272).

In what follows I shall do little more than outline the tensions between different traditions of the visual as well as some of the different forms and positions resulting from the intense struggle to see/write *with, through, or against* the eye. Whether such struggle can be understood as a "countertendency" within the modernist project itself, "an explicitly antvisual impulse that ultimately prepared the way for what has become known as post-modernism," (Jay 160-61) will be the underlying question to which, however, I can only offer a tentative answer.

II

"'Modernism' in literature has, since the beginning of this century, been haunted by the spirit of 'imagism' . . . ," writes W.J.T. Mitchell in *The Language of Images* presumably in allusion to imagism's evident complicity with a modernist culture of the image and the eye (1). Perhaps one could also say that it has been haunted by Emerson's figure of the "transparent eye-ball" in which the "mere" eye of everyday perception is transcended in the all-encompassing grasp of visionary seeing. Indeed, whether acknowledged or not, Emerson's ideas have left a visible trace in the rhetoric of American modernism: not only his linking of the I (as self-reliant subject) to the Eye as its main instrument of perception and cognition ("the eye,—the mind —"); but also his connecting the act of seeing with the act of knowing and both to an effort to construct the world by (re)naming it—a world always already there and yet to be made new through its linguistic reconstruction as visual and sensuous existence. With Emerson, therefore, the eye is not at all a passive receptacle of impressions but "plastic," active, the best of artists, the best composer; it never just sees but constructs in its seeing so that "we come to look at the world with new eyes" (Emerson 48). For the imagination expresses itself in "a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being *where* and *what* it sees" (48). Although, with Emerson, the *where* and *what* of seeing was notoriously difficult to state, his disciple and fellow-transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau placed and defined his seeing with the precision of the naturalist: By intensely observing and describing the object in front of his eyes, he (or rather: it) is made to reveal its symbolic essence.

The imagists would presumably have rejected the implied vagueness of Emerson's idealizing vision—as much as they would have separated the "I" from the "Eye" in order to keep the notion of "objective" transparency. For Pound understood his theory (as much as H.D.'s practice) of Imagism as a double counter-discourse: On one hand, it projected the concept of the clear and hard-edged image against the ornamental vagueness of late-romantic or Victorian verse by evoking a classical tradition of Greek marble.

On the other hand, the "alabaster" image was set as classic stasis/stillness against their culture's voracious demand for moving images (the age's "accelerated grimace"). The postulate of a "direct treatment of the thing" ("straight as the Greeks") was part of an anti-subjectivist project that tried to avoid any direct expression of emotion by finding its "sensory equivalent" in the objective and visually concrete image. ("The equation for emotion, not the emotion itself"). It was here, in its demand of the visually concrete, that Imagism proved most influential, since it tied in with a larger cultural movement at the turn of the century and after: a masculine reclaiming of literary and cultural territory lost to women, or the feminine and effeminate. Especially the antiromanticism of E.T. Hulme's essays had emphasized such classicist male hardness and (self)discipline in its demand for a new poetic language of the concrete.

However, the very evocation of Greek marble and of classic stillness implied an aesthetic ideal of the statuesque and gestural which seemed, in its very stylization, conventional and academic. Therefore Pound left Imagism behind not only because Amy Lowell took it over but because he was aware that the new developments in literature and the arts went *with* and not *against*, the dynamics of modernity.

III

"To study BLAST and related books and journals of 1914," Marjorie Perloff writes in her *The Futurist Moment*, "is to see that, whatever the protests lodged by Lewis, Pound and their artist friends, Vorticism would not have come into being without the Futurist model" (171). And indeed, in its opening manifesto, Vorticism, like Futurism, draws its inspiration "from machinery, Factories, new and vaster buildings, bridges and works" (Materer 26). In the name of Vorticism Pound dynamizes, energizes his concept of the image—of the image not as an equivalent to mood or sentiment but as formal expression of emotional energy, "a sense of sudden

liberation."¹ Although visual concreteness is still essential (as is apparent in Pound's Metro-poem), emphasis has been clearly shifted to juxtaposition and dynamic correlation, and thus to mental process: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," thus Pound's famous definition. "It is a radiant node or cluster; it is . . . a VORTEX, from which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. In decency one can only call it a VORTEX. And from its necessity came the name 'Vorticism'. *Nomina sunt consequentia rerum*, and never was that statement of Aquinas more true than in the case of the vorticist movement" (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 92). If names indeed issue from the things they must show them as in a state of activity and motion. Through the dynamics of the image the mind/body is connected to the patterns of a "world of moving energies." "An image, in our sense, is real because we know it directly." We know it with "a subtle and instantaneous perception. . . such as savages and wild animals have of the necessities and dangers of the forest" (Pound, *Affirmations* 278).

Such promise of a more direct knowledge—via a perception which would seem to link the eye to a larger kinetic and instinctual apparatus—made Pound appreciate Fenollosa's work on the "Chinese Written Character," a system of notation "based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature" (Fenollosa 8). As a form of writing it was closer to original perception than any form of western writing ever could be. In contrast to the abstract linear sentence structure of Western grammars, the Chinese ideogram creates, thus Max Nänni interprets Fenollosa, "a mosaic field by merely 'combining several pictorial elements in a single character'" (Nänni 76). For its ideographic roots "carry in them a verbal idea of action" (Fenollosa 9). Things as well as nouns are thus never seen in isolation but always in active interrelation with each other. "The eye sees noun and verb in one: things in motion, motion in things" (10). The Chi-

¹ "Pound seems to redefine Imagism in terms of *energeia*, which Aristotle defined (*Rhetoric* III, xi) as making one's hearer 'see things' by 'using expressions that represent things as in a state of activity.'" (Materer 23)

nese ideogram is therefore a Poundian image cluster, charged with semantic energy, an equation expressive of things in action and relation, of mental processes open to, and connected with, a universe in flux. In Fenollosa's eyes, the pictorial method is a language close to a lost or forgotten origin and, at the same time, the ideal language of a future world.

Pound "translated this non-literate graphic device into literate terms, into the iconic device of the ideogrammatic method,"—the combination and fusion of separate image clusters—and made it the main compositional principle of *The Cantos* (Nänny 76). In a similar way, Sergej Eisenstein adopted the ideogram as a cinematographic method to define his own logic and strategy of montage—a technique he based on the "conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other" and called (since "every art is conflict,") an "imagist transformation of the dialectical principle" (Eisenstein 37, 38).²

Especially in his early *Cantos*, Pound linked his own cinematographic method of representing a world in motion to Ovid's mythology of change and transformation. In a short dialogue, "Religio, or The Child's Guide to Knowledge" (publ. 1918), he had written what may well be thought of as a key to Ovid's book as much as to his own poems. "What is a god? (the child asks). A god is an eternal state of mind. . . . When is a god manifest? When the states of mind take form. When does a man become a god? When he enters one of these states of mind. In what manner do gods appear? Formed and formless. To what do they appear when formed? To the sense of vision. May they when formed appear to anything save the sense of vision? We may gain a sense of their presence as if they were standing behind us" (Pound, *Selected Prose* 45-47). In some of these *Cantos*, the gods take form in a montage of intensely visual and visionary images, as in Canto II which, in its second part, re-visions the third book of the *Metamorphoses* dealing with the rape of Dionysos and the transformations he worked on his blasphemers. Although the story is told by Acoetes, at once pilot of the ship and eye-witness ("And I worship./I have seen what I have seen") the poem is not anchored in an act of individual perception but the

² On Pound, Fenollosa, Eisenstein and Japanese Theater see Hesse.

linguistic expression of a mental state: the intense visual perception of the natural world as an awareness, a consciousness of divine presence:

Black azure and hyaline,
 glass wave over Tyro,
 Close over, unstillness,
 bright welter of wave-cords,
 The quiet water,
 quiet in the buff sands,
 Sea-fowl stretching wing-joints,
 splashing in rock-hollows and sand-hollows
 In the wave-runs by the half-dune;
 Glass-glint of wave in the tide-rips against sunlight,
 pallor of Hesperus,
 Grey peak of the wave,
 wave, colour of grape's pulp . . .

(Canto II)

Acoetes/Pound gives testimony to the reality of the gods, and his proof is the poem which makes available to us, in the words of Altieri, "a modality for perceiving and constructing" (313) a world in which we sense their (the gods) continuing presence "as if they were standing behind us." "We appear to have lost the radiant world," Pound wrote in his essay on Cavalcanti,

where *one* thought cuts through *another* with clean edge, a world of moving energies . . . , magnetisms that take form, that are seen, or that border the visible, the matter of Dante's paradiso, the glass under water, the form that seems a form seen in a mirror, these realities perceptible to the sense, interacting . . . (Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* 154)

Although there is a faint echo of Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" here, Pound's longing for a return to origins meant more than creating (by re-visioning) a literary and cultural tradition. It also implied return to a state of consciousness in which the eye, always also the mind's eye, responded more immediately to the processes of nature. That he tied his hopes for a "rebuilding of the visual world" (Wyndham Lewis) to the likes of Mussolini should not hide his affinity to what Emerson defined as the poet's

liberating project: to restore the blind to "perfect sight," to make us see the world—through the reconstructive power of language—with "new eyes."

IV

To discuss Gertrude Stein under the heading of "literature of the eye" may, at first glance, seem quite arbitrary. She had nothing to do with Imagism, nor with Pound's concept of the image as vortex. One could even say that although she was keenly interested in the visual arts, her own work was not particularly visual. Nevertheless I take Pound and Stein as the two opposite poles between which American modernist writing developed and fluctuated: the poles of visuality and of abstraction. For even if we do accept Altieri's reinterpretation of modernist American poetry as formed throughout by a constructivist aesthetic, we still have to take into account that a substantial part of it—Pound's, H.D.'s, Marianne Moore's, Hart Crane's poetry—is, after all, a verbal construction of sight, perception, vision.

Although William James called *Three Lives* "a new kind of realism," reality, for Stein, was constituted by composition, was a matter of the materiality of words, their individual value, their syntactical arrangement. Or, to put it the other way around, language was not primarily a medium of perceived reality but an order of reality itself. Accordingly her ties to the Emersonian tradition (to Walt Whitman as well as to Adam and Eve) are not based on a rhetoric of seeing but of naming. ("[T]he poet is the Namer or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's" Emerson 456-57.) Since the familiar names hide the things they name instead of bringing them to consciousness ("as everybody knew the names of everything/ poetry had less and less to do with everything" Stein, *Lectures* 233), there is a constant need for new ways of linguistic representation. That this new language and manner of composition also amounted to a new way of seeing, to a reconstruction of the eye, takes nothing away from the fact that in the texture of Stein's writings sight is

not privileged.³ Perhaps one can say that it was precisely because she learned so much from the visual art of modernist painting that she regarded the visual image, as "too much appeal to the eye," (Stein in Scott 510) as a temptation, an incomplete realization of the potentialities of one's own medium. Although she saw her methods of writing as analogous to those of Cubist painting, she did not write to paint, even though she also said at one occasion that she wrote with her eyes.

She learned from Cézanne "that in composition one thing is as important as another thing" (in Scott 502)—a principle of dehierarchization that could be transferred from composition to the medium of language: to dissolve the hierarchical structure of the sentence, the classification of words or word groups. If Pound used Fenollosa to develop the concept of a more immediate and original language that would grasp the relation between things as a fusion of image and action (or of image as action), Stein seems closer to William James's plea to dissolve the rigidities of English grammar in order to give a more immediate expression to the relational complexity between mind and world:

We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use." (James 189-90)

Stein was as obsessed as Pound with a world in motion and with "language as a living, moving and acting entity" (Meyer 100) but her distaste of what she must have considered as the descriptively visual was so in-

³ The effort to verbally deconstruct the visual so that one can 'see' the things "everybody is certain of seeing, but which they do not really see" connects her writing to the work of the cubist painters. "To see things as they are, and not merely to observe what is anticipated or remembered, one has to rid oneself, empty oneself, of everything one already knows—one has to get out of 'the habit,' as Stein puts it, 'of knowing what one was looking at'" (Meyer 117). She describes this act of naming by unnamings again in "Poetry and Grammar": "I remember . . . looking at anything until something that was not the name of that thing but was in a way that actual thing would come to be written" (*Lectures* 237).

tense that she developed structures of movement and relation out of the "dense materiality" of the medium itself. "Repetition, variation, permutation, the minuscule transfer of a given word from one syntactical slot to another, one part of speech to another," writes Marjorie Perloff about her early style, "creates a compositional field that remains in constant motion, that prevents closure from taking place." (Perloff, *Poetic Licence* 153) In her portraits of "Matisse" and "Picasso" as well as in *The Making of Americans* she works with such linguistic structures of repetition in variation which is to bring out the inner quality of the character portrayed in rhythms of essential sameness in difference, thus creating a dynamic-form-in-motion. It constitutes a linguistic space of non-visual perception "filled with moving" which, like the cinematic sequence of almost identical filmic frames, keeps movement in a "continuous present" and yet holds each moment in its difference (Stein, *Lectures* 198).

Cézanne

The Irish lady can say, that to-day is every day. Caesar can say that every day is to-day and they say that every day is as they say.

In this way we have a place to stay and he was not met because he was settled to stay. When I said settled I meant settled to stay. When I said settled to stay I meant settled to stay Saturday. In this way a mouth is a mouth. In this way if in as a mouth if in as a mouth where, if in as a mouth where and there. Believe they have water too. Believe they have that water too and blue when you see blue, is all blue precious too, is all that that is precious too is all that and they meant to absolve you. In this way Cezanne nearly did nearly in this way Cezanne nearly did nearly did and nearly did. And was I surprised. Was I very surprised. Was I surprised. I was surprised and in that patient, are you patient when you find bees. Bees in a garden make a specialty of honey and so does honey. Honey and prayer. Honey and there. There where the grass can grow nearly four times yearly.

This is a portrait not of a character but of the character of a man's work: emphasizing its everydayness of topic, its rootedness in the local, its repetitions as insistence of recurring motif and structure. This effect is produced in patterns of rhythm and sound: ei, au, u:, i: they form compositional planes, whereby the sounds seem to echo the colors mentioned either indirectly or directly: the green in Irish and of grass, blue, or the

golden/brown of bees and honey. These (green, blue, brown) are Cézannes favorite colors. The emphatic expression of surprise acknowledges the impact his paintings had on Stein and its sweet results: bees, honey, grass four times a year.

Although "Cézanne," in its repetitions, echoes Stein's earlier method in her first portrait of Picasso, it also points toward the strategies which she applied most radically in *Tender Buttons*. Here she is done with the structures of repetition, shifts her attention from verb and pronoun to the noun and the value of the individual word: its material density of sound and suggestiveness. The texts of *Tender Buttons* create an aura of connotative richness without creating a consistent plane of correlated meaning—yet also without being able to create words without any meaning.

I began to play with words then. I was a little obsessed by words of equal value. . . . I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. . . . I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. (in Scott 504)

The title associates—perhaps ironically—the household sphere of women but also has erotic and self-referential connotations. (The latter is true if we read "tender" not as adjective but as verb inviting the reader to engage in a sensuous and playful exchange.) The text whose three parts: Objects, Food, Rooms, seem to point toward a thematic coherence, resist any attempt at consistently meaningful interpretation. Feminist readings have seen consistency only in its systematic subversion of the logocentric principle, the liberation of words from the burden of having to make sense. "Act so that there is no use in a centre," "the teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful." *Tender Buttons* enacts its sexual/textual tease in several ways: on the one hand, the text is full of allusions to the male and female sexual organs; on the other, it emphasizes—by its playful oscillation between sense and non-sense—its own linguistic "bodylines."

Therefore one might indeed argue that the text deconstructs the modernist dominance of the "eye" together with its logocentric structures, but it may be useful to remember, that *Tender Buttons* issued, at least in part,

from acts of visual perception. About the first part, "Objects," she writes: "I used to take objects on a table, like a tumbler or any kind of object and try to get the picture of it clear and separate in my mind and create a word relationship between the word and the thing seen" (in Scott 509). Knowing by rediscovering the value of individual words was only another attempt at finding a new language of perception. To see things in a new way (to see them "really") meant to radically separate perception from memory, to watch out "that looking was not confusing itself with remembering." Since the culturally acquired system of language makes us recognize beforehand what we only believe to see but actually don't because we know it by name before we see it, new words have to replace the names so that seeing becomes possible again in/through writing. In this sense, Stein indeed writes as much with her eyes as she sees with her writing. Yet not on the basis of resemblance (the mirror image of mimesis) but of metonymic difference: "a blind glass," "not unordered in not resembling."

V

Although William Carlos Williams is undoubtedly indebted to Imagism and Pound's concept of the image, he also acknowledged an affinity between his own work and Stein's project of re-naming which aimed, like his, at a reconstruction of perception through a radical reconstruction of language. "Stein"—he wrote in his essay "A 1 Pound Stein"—

has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean. . . . It can't be helped that the whole house has to come down. . . . And it's got to come down because it has to be built (*Essays* 163-64).

The extensive metaphor of building may be an echo of Emerson for whom building one's own world and naming it were related actions. In the case of Williams rebuilding the world in, and through, language, "to remodel words and shapes," is part of a "constructivist aesthetics," yet also a linguistic re-visioning of the familiar objects of common experience. What "stands eternally in the way of really good writing is . . . the virtual

impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose." (*Essays* 11) The poem thus exists in close sensuous relation to the world, not as its replica but as its revealed essence, its true Real. "The same things exist, but in a different condition when energized by the imagination. . . . It is the imagination on which reality rides" (WCW, *Imaginations* 138). Therefore—says Charles Altieri—writing, for Williams, is an "act of realization": the objects re-perceived through language reveal their dynamic essence, their true being, in their poetic form (Altieri 224-26).

The famous poem on the red wheelbarrow is a simple and obvious example of such a poetics of realization—of a concretely visualized object that, at the same time, points toward its linguistic made-ness. This is apparent not only in the opening line but also in the way the words are arranged on the page so that they are individually isolated and yet work on each other. Still, the "so much depends" would remain an empty gesture if it would be a purely self-referential one. It draws the eye's attention—caringly, lovingly—to an object of everyday experience—much as it points to the love and care that went into the linguistic construction of it. "So much depends upon the red wheelbarrow," Altieri writes in an illuminating analysis,

because so much depends on understanding what is at stake in the dual attributes of that "so much depends:" the mind's manifestation of an abiding principle of care . . . and the mind's becoming itself virtually tactile, in its efforts to compose the world so that those cares can reside in actual phenomena. (233)

Similar qualities are noticeable in a much less known and quite different poem by Williams,

The Cod Head

Miscellaneous weed
strands, stems, debris—
firmament

to fishes—
where the yellow feet
of gulls dabble

oars whip
ships churn to bubbles—
at night wildly

agitate phosphores-
cent midges—but by day
flaccid

moons in whose
discs sometimes a red cross
lives—four

fathom—the bottom skids
a mottle of green
sands backward—

amorphous waver-
ing rocks—three fathom
the vitreous
body through which -
small scudding fish deep
down—and

now a lulling lift
and fall—
red stars—a severed—

head between two
green stones—lifting
falling

(*CEP* 333)

The intense visuality of this poem paradoxically goes hand in hand with an almost equally intense sense of its abstractness. It gives the impression of being very tightly composed—in its handling of the line, its rhythm and sound pattern, its verbal economy, of the energy of words acting upon each other. There is a predominance of noun and adjective—hardly any verbs, "oars whip" and a boat apparently moves on the surface of the water but the water itself is stagnant, only moves vertically "lifting/falling." Although the seascape is marked by decay, the poem itself evokes a sensuous richness which comes from its visual images as much as from the

tactile density of words rubbing against each other. If Kenneth Burke is right, and the "severed cod -/head" is really the "severed Godhead," (cp. Mariani 318) the poem enacts such knowledge not through a language of metaphysical desolation but the sensuous affirmation of the stagnant and the wasted.

However, there is nevertheless a deep consciousness of loss in Williams; a yearning for the "cries of wonder let out by Columbus' men on seeing the new world actually" (*Essays* 144). Williams documented his "magnificent wish" for the New in his alternative history of America, *In the American Grain*. It is a history mostly of the failure to adequately respond to the challenge of the new, and its timid replacement by familiar and imported patterns of thought and language. Yet if Williams' history is a record of lost origin, it is also a record of its latent presence, of the new as the essentially Real. "In these studies"—he writes in his epigraph—"I have sought to re-name the things seen, now lost in chaos of borrowed titles, many of them inappropriate, under which the true character lies hid." Williams's "realizations" thus rediscover and recapture the lost presence of the real in the newness of its linguistic (re)construction.

Although Williams' concept of the real *as* the new seems to be shaped by naming⁴ and by seeing (so that, in fact, one might be tempted to say: his imagination is all eyes), it is also apparent that "seeing" alone is never quite enough since the failure of the white settlers was not of sight but of touch—the fear to bodily contact, merge, comingle in the concrete here and now.⁵ To see with touch or touching care and attention, through a medium at once tactile, dynamic, and visual—this is part of a redemptive vision of immanence in which "eye" is more than sight, and the act of mind rooted in the sensuous awareness of a world of objects: "The only world that exists is the world of the senses." "A life that is here and now is time-

⁴ "when we name it, life exists" (*Imaginations* 115).

⁵ In the early "Notes from a Talk on Poetry" Williams had already argued that modern poetry "has been under the necessity of realizing that eyes, ears, fingertips, everything

less. That is the universal I am seeking: to embody in a work of art, a new world that is always 'real'" (*Essays* 196).

VI

If "The Codhead" confronts us with a world seen, it does so without a subject seeing it. It is at once immersed in and detached from a world it has constructed as seen and yet objective. In conclusion, let me briefly look at two writers who made highly subjective use of the eye—Hart Crane and H.D. Shortly after Crane's death Williams had laconically stated their difference in a brief review of *The Bridge*: "Crane wanted to be cosmic, I think. This is the reason he often took his eye from the word—and the word slipped away from him. . . His eyes seem to me often to have been blurred by 'vision' when they should have been held hard, as hard as he could hold them, on the object." (WCW, *Crane* 4) How eyes could be 'blurred' by vision, Crane would have never understood. It pleased him that Siquieros, in painting him, had given him the seer's eye, protrusive and, like Emerson's transparent eyeball, all-encompassing—fusing a world of fragments into one. In his symbolic reconception of Brooklyn Bridge, Crane took recourse to the photographic work of his friend and mentor Alfred Stieglitz who used the camera as an instrument of Emersonian vision, as a visionary eye. Its ability to hold "in a unique way the single moment," made it—thus Paul Strand in an essay of 1922—an instrument of intuitive knowledge (Broom 257). Crane delighted especially in Stieglitz's photographic studies of trees and clouds which caught the "moment in transition" and thus revealed dynamic wholeness beneath a surface-world of change and fragmentation. "Speed is at the bottom of it all," he wrote in a letter about Stieglitz, "the hundredth of a second caught so precisely that the motion is continued from the picture infinitely: the moment made eternal" (*Letters* 132). Like one of Stieglitz's caught moments, the bridge, for

we are, everything we do, is constantly wearing out. The sense seeks avidly not only a language, but a fresh language . . ." (215).

Crane, was arrested movement that had broken through the ceaseless cinematic flow of images and fused the fragments of metropolitan experience into a visible form of continuity and Presence: the Word made steel and stone,—Keats' Grecian urn modernized, Americanized and revised in the technological miracle of Brooklyn Bridge. Williams had no interest in this kind of mythic immanence. Whereas Crane froze process into timeless moment, for Williams timelessness *was* process: giving caring attention to an ever changing Now of perception; finding, in a field of incessantly changing experience, the language that would register "instantaneously" the movement and ongoing transformation of the perceived object. Whereas Crane's linguistic power is one of metaphoric fusion and condensation, Williams's poems give evidence of the transfigurative energy of the imagination: its ability to 'enter the world naked' again and again. His secular god, the newness of America, survived in the energy of the imagination to revolutionize the word and to constantly re-perceive the world by recreating it in language.

H.D. had been the purest of the imagists—with an idea of verse hard-edged, precise and densely visual, as if cut in marble. Williams, whom she had criticized for not taking his own art seriously enough, raged against her Hellenic perfection of style: "There is nothing in literature but change and change *is* mockery" (*Essays* 10). However, it was exactly at that time, during the late tens and early twenties, that H.D. seems to have moved away from objectivation and towards revaluing the subjective and emotional. *HERmione* is autobiographical fiction and *roman à clef* (written in the mid-twenties, yet published posthumously). It describes a crisis of self-finding, the slow and painful emergence of a sexual and creative identity. It revolves around H.D. (alias Her Gart) and Ezra Pound, who goes under the name of George Lowndes in the book. *HERmione*'s unstable identity also destabilizes the narrative perspective. The name *HERmione* (or simply: Her) allows for a strange mixing of perspectives, since it marks the narrative I as self-consciously aware of being the object of its own narration: I am Her. Thus the narrative voice is not only extremely subjective but also perceives, with cool detachment, her own subjectivity. It is a view

from inside which also sees itself from the outside in a process of quasi-schizophrenic self-analysis. H.D. thus uses the stream of consciousness neither in terms of controlled self-reflexion nor as uncontrolled stream of associations but as a highly conscious and abstracted, yet immediate and imaginative transformation of the sensuously and visually perceived: Sensuous perception is also inner vision described by a narrator who, seeing herself as self, is also strangely beside herself. The text is at once linguistically transparent and visually concrete—no matter whether it registers inner vision or outside perception. In her posthumously published "Notes on Thought and Vision" (1919), H.D. compares this particularly mode of visionary perception with seeing as if under water:

Sometimes when I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water. . . . That over-mind seems a cap, like water, transparent, fluid, yet with definite body, contained in a definite space: It is like a closed sea-plant, jelly-fish or anemone. . . . I first realized this state of consciousness in my head, I visualize it just as well, now, centered in the love region of the body or placed like a foetus in the body. . . . The majority of dream and of ordinary vision is vision of the womb. The brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important. (Scott 93-95)

Seeing *with* or *through* the womb is, quite literally, hysteric vision. Perhaps one could say that H.D., in *HERmione*, consciously makes hysteria a specific form of feminine writing: as a clairvoyantly exalted counterposition, as a form of subversive feminine self-expression on the margins, directed not only against the system of culturally prescribed gender roles but also against the male objective style that was part of the imagist tradition.

Can we call this reemergence of the subjective, or the merging of the visual and the tactile, of the body and the eye (of which H:D.'s vision of the womb is only the most extreme example), a deconstruction of the eye? Only if we understand the Eye merely as sight and instrument of observation. But the "eye" of transcendentalist as well as modernist vision was always more than that. It implied the loving grasp of the object seen—seen with care and attention. It accepted the eye as interconnected with all the senses, as dynamized, merged with body and womb, in linguistic abstractness as well as in physical density of language. In all cases, the words

liberated from the "fixities" of meaning, "affirm reality by their flight" (as Williams put it at the end of *Spring & All*). This liberation of language is yet enacted within a frame of reference—grounded in a religion of immanence—that can be narrow if focused concretely on the object represented as perceived or wide if focused on the linguistic materiality of the object as re-named. Both—the referential frame as well as the linguistic self-reference—are implied in an ideology of seeing which conceives of the poem as being *in* a world of the senses, *of* such a world, and a sensuous world in itself.

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PETER SCHNECK

The Purity of Poverty: Walker Evans and Iconographic Autonomy

Introduction

Despite the common assumption that an image is worth a thousand words it cannot talk for itself. Eloquent and silent at the same time, the image opens a delicate passage from seeing to reading through which the visual acquires a language. If photography is a kind of writing as the term suggests—a writing with the basic differential of perception: light and shadow—then the photographic image is a kind of speech or a text. Not simply one speech or one text, though, but many: the image presents a moment of confluence of all the various potential descriptions with which we give names to what we see. Thus any image confronts us with the challenge to find the right words for an appropriate description of what it shows. But once the words we choose to be appropriate allow for the appropriation of the image through language, the image no longer shows but, rather, appears to make us see. Only with the help of words then can we channel and control the image's uncanny eloquence and turn it into a telling picture.

If this is to be more than just a metaphorical manner of speaking¹, we might ask, how exactly, and when and why, specific images are able to emit this kind of eloquence, and thus turn into icons, while many others remain silent, that is, remain just images. These questions are specifically interesting in regard to photography, since the visual culture of 20th Century is (or was) essentially photographic, and our cultural iconography, even after the advent of film, television, and digital imagery is still domi-

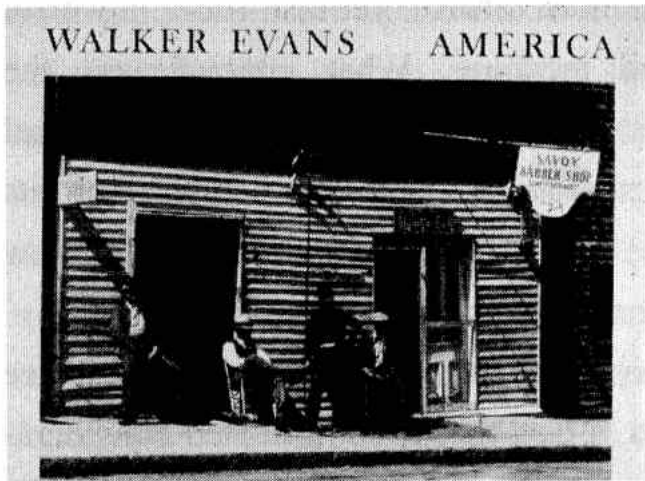
¹ For the specific power of these metaphors see Steiner, Mitchell *Iconology*, Bryson and Melville.

nated by the visual versatility of the photographic, or still image. However this may change over the next decades, there is one aspect which is not likely to do so, and that is the startling contrast between the sheer number of visual images that are produced, distributed, looked at, and immediately forgotten on the one hand, and, on the other, the concentration of iconographic power over time in a comparatively small group of images, which most people will immediately recognize and even memorize, when they close their eyes. But if these photographic icons appear to transcend their historical place and moment, to assume some culturally essential or even universal meaning, they can do so only because they are already charged with (invisible) words; i.e. they resonate with and respond to certain discourses on iconography.

What interests me here is the specific relation between images and words on which the iconographic power of photographs as cultural icons rests. More specifically, my focus will be on a group of photographic images by Walker Evans, which have come to represent both a style and an aesthetic that insist on the iconographic autonomy of the image. Most people will identify Evans' work with the documentary photographs he did in the 1930s, even though he continued to produce significant work until his death in 1975.² Beyond their immediate content, Evans' documentary images, most of them done for the photographic unit of the Resettlement Administration (RA, later Farm Security Agency, FSA), have become visual symbols of a distinct period of American social and cultural history—the Depression years—and helped to construct an "America of the imagination," as Alan Trachtenberg aptly put it ("Walker Evans' America" 66).

By way of introduction, and as a telling illustration of the identification between image and imagination, we may take a look at the cover of a recent collection of Walker Evans' photographs. What we see is a simple design which connects two proper names in the title, "Walker Evans" and

² See the catalogues of major exhibitions of Evans' work listed below. In regard to one more recent exhibition a critic wrote in 2000 that Evans' images from 1936, which



Cover page of *Walker Evans America*. © 1990
 Photograph: Walker Evans, *Vicksburg Negroes
 and shop front, Mississippi*. 1936. Library of
 Congress, Prints&Photographs Division, FSA-
 OWI Collection [LC-USF342-T01-008063-A].
 © Courtesy of the publisher Rizzoli New York.

"America," with a black and white photograph of a street scene below them. Of course, this is a straightforward announcement of the book's content. However, there is another relation which is suggested by the specific combination of words and image. It seems that the image is what holds the name 'Walker Evans' and the name 'America' together; that is, while the

name of the author and the name of the country do not represent each other, they are bound to one another through the force of their common nominator, the image, which stands at the same time for Walker Evans and for America. Used to certain conventions in the presentation of books, we may also read "Walker Evans" as the author of the book "America," another America, which is represented, or even created, by the image below. And yet, while this mutual representation of words and image binds them together and enforces a specific reading—that is the image begins to tell about America and about Walker Evans—, this telling is marked by a silence, the silence of the photograph itself and what it represents. The reason is that we do not know enough and can say nothing about the people in the image, or its time and location, although presumably we can infer that it was taken by Walker Evans somewhere in America. Moreover, we lack the words to describe and to name what we see because this lack has been so efficiently filled by the simple force of the proper name and place: Walker Evans—America. In fact, the image has been turned into an icon exactly by redirecting its discursive potential from the level of re-

were included in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, were "beyond reasonable doubt, his greatest work" (Epstein, n.p.).

presentative particularity to another, more diffuse, yet also more powerful level of universal symbolism and meaning. What characterizes the transformation of image into icon is that its silence on the level of visual representation—the absence of information—becomes a precondition of its eloquence on the iconographic level; by its simple combination with a few words, the silence of the image begins to speak.

In the following I attempt to interrogate more closely the telling silence of Walker Evans' images of America, a task that is complicated considerably by the fact that these images have been made to talk in very specific ways. It is also an attempt to restore to some degree the reasons why Evans' photographs have come to be so closely associated with a discourse on seeing and representation, which combines perceptual accuracy with aesthetic expression. This discourse allows us to speak of Evans' images both as documents *and* artworks, or more precisely, it allows the images to transcend their documentary grounding in the historical specifics of time and place, and to turn into artistic symbols with universal value. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this is not a property but, rather, an *effect* of the image, which results from its position at the center of a discursive field, i.e. a set of descriptions and perceptual attitudes that support specific readings of the image while downplaying or even excluding other, equally possible, readings. What specifically characterizes the field of documentary aesthetics that surrounds the images of Walker Evans is a strategy of discursive denial and an emphasis on iconographic autonomy. At various stages of the reception and critical discussion of Evans' work, as I will discuss in more detail later, we find repeated emphasis on the alleged 'nature' of Evans' photographs as discourses in their own right; as images that 'speak' for themselves; which 'tell' stories, and which therefore have to be treated as visual 'texts.' There is always something puzzling about such claims, since they so obviously rely on the persuasive power of verbal ascriptions; after all, if someone says "this picture speaks for itself," before it does so, one nevertheless would have to first take his or her word for it. Such discursive ascriptions are successful only if they deny their

own function in the construction of the image's iconographic autonomy, yet they also rely on certain visual strategies. Some images may be better suited than others for this claim, since they display certain characteristics in regard to content and composition that may serve as visual evidence for an already developed discursive potential, which then merely asks for a translation into words. Evans' "documentary style," as he preferred to call it (Katz 87), presents an extreme example of these strategies, whose main features are the de-contextualization of the image, a tendency toward abstraction, and the inclusion of dispersed and fragmented discursive material within the image (the depiction of words, signs, writing etc.). As means of expression, these strategies have become common fare in the visual arts ever since classical modernism; in the American context one could name for instance the works of Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, Georgia O'Keefe, in painting, or Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand in photography. However, it is precisely the combination of Evans' visual strategies with a discourse on documentary photography, its aesthetics and its cultural significance, which gives his claims for iconographic autonomy another, rather decisive twist.³

In order to understand the specific claims of Evans' images, there are a few observations to be made about the photograph as document and as artwork. Documentary photography, since this is what concerns us here, stands for a special mode of visual representation. What makes it special is its claim to represent reality or an aspect of reality in such a way as to allow access to this reality through our experience of the picture. In fact, documentary photography stands in for experience, as Warren Susman states: "the whole idea of documentary . . . makes it possible to see, know, and feel the details of life, to feel oneself part of some other's experience"

³ For Evans' early interest in modernist art, see Trachtenberg, *Reading*; Greif, and Galassi. Linking Evans' photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to the modernist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg, W. J. T. Mitchell writes: "Evans' photos are like aggressively untitled abstract paintings, bereft of names, reference, and 'literary' elements. They force us back onto the formal and material features of the images in themselves" (293).

(qtd. in Stott 8) While the claim of documentary photography as a privileged mode of access to 'real' or actual experience may be debated, the emphasis on experience and authenticity clearly marks its point of contrast and competition with works of art. In contrast to art, documentary representation claims that its force is less a matter of ingenious individual creation, but rather of staying true to the subject it represents, in one way or another. The latter claim may also inform a specific objective in art, for instance in realist painting. Yet, because it involves a mechanical process of image-making, the photograph has a rather unique relation to the object it represents, compared to other modes of visual representation which fully rely on human skills of perception and depiction. While this difference initially assured the superiority of the photographic image in terms of visual truth, it also presented a great obstacle to its common reception as an art form.⁴ Even though the aesthetic concepts of Modernism, which emerged in American culture after 1910, acknowledged and praised photography as an art form precisely for the objective, anti-romantic mode of vision it allowed, the aesthetic potential was seen to rest on the degree of creative and compositional control over the image by the artist.⁵ The simple photographic record of visual reality was not regarded as aesthetic in itself. This attitude changed during the thirties when the increasing cultural recognition of documentary photography prepared the ground for a reassessment of the relation between the artistic and the documentary. The photographs of Walker Evans from this period served as a crucial point of departure for the development of a new discourse on documentary aes-

⁴ See Maynard and Scharf.

⁵ See for instance Paul Strand's 1922 article "Photography and the New God," for modernist attitudes toward photography. According to Evans, Strand's famous image of a blind beggar had a tremendous influence on his ideas about the aesthetic potential of photography (cf. Katz). The major problem of Strand's and Evans' understanding of photography as an artform was that its subjects were not regarded as aesthetic, but rather, as banal or even ugly. But even when critics like Stieglitz or Waldo Frank would praise their photographs as works of art, they did not emphasize their 'documentary' value. Before the mid-Thirties the connection between documentary and aesthetic value in photography did not exist.

thetics, and Evans' images subsequently were used again and again to revise and refine its central categories. Probably the most successful term to support the symbolic and aesthetic force of documentary photography was that of the image as a 'story.' Alan Trachtenberg has called attention to the fact that the initial use of the concept of documentary in the thirties strongly emphasized the narrative dimension of photographic images. Thus, the readers of *U.S. Camera 1939*, which featured a collection of photographs from the FSA, were asked by Edward Steichen in his introduction to "[h]ave a look" at the images and "listen to the story they tell." Steichen specifically singled out one image by Evans (the now famous picture of a graveyard and crosses in a Pennsylvania mining town), which, in Steichen's words: "For sheer story telling impact . . . would be hard to beat" (qtd. in Trachtenberg "Image to Story" 48). The same photograph was pointed out by Roy Stryker to members of the American Historical Association in 1939 as a valuable historical document, which "speaks volumes" about the pitfalls of industrial and urban growth, although, Stryker significantly added, "the dramatic composition of the photograph makes it an example of a type that is interpretative as well as documentary" (48-49). Stryker's afterthought already indicates that a narrative approach to photographic documents, while it may enhance the sheer power of their message, might also lead to readings that are in fact already interpretations. Yet while Stryker clearly contends that such excessive interpretations are affected by the intentional 'interpretative' character of Evans' picture, Trachtenberg holds that Evans' approach was much more disinterested. Consequently, any 'rewriting' of Evans' images as specific 'stories' merely attempts to "capture an elusive essence" by the "readings projected upon" them ("Image to Story" 49). In contrast to Trachtenberg, however, my interest in such projected readings, that is, precisely, in the various stories that Evans' images have been made to tell, rests on the thesis that Evans' disinterestedness in regard to his subjects is a conscious strategy of both denying and inviting discursive projections (i.e. "readings")—even those that are at odds with each other. What sounds like a

paradox is in fact an attempt to reconcile the documentary with the aesthetic, or better, to dissolve the former into the latter. As we will see, the stories which evolved around Evans' images from the beginning, not only reacted to this invitation (and its denial) but, moreover, offered a resource of potential scripts which saturated the discursive charge of the images without ever exhausting it. What is exhausted beyond recovery, however, is the documentary reference to a specific time, place and experience, especially where the conditions of poverty as a social and historical fact are concerned.

My focus on the outset will be on Walker Evans' and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a work which has always been praised as a collaborative effort of words and images in documenting reality and experience on the one hand, and on the other as an exemplary attempt to enlist artistic means in search for an authentic portrayal of poverty during the Great Depression. What interests me especially is Agee's reaction to Evans' images in terms of the complementary, yet also clearly competitive representation of reality. Agee's remarks on the difference between writing and reading versus photographing and seeing offer the groundwork for the cultural reception of Evans' documentary photography as a distinct "style." While the common recognition of this foundation of a documentary aesthetics was delayed because of the unique history of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the commentaries of Lincoln Kirstein on Evans' images on occasion of their exhibition in 1938 as *American Photographs* had a more immediate impact. In fact, Kirstein's remarks and the specific composition of both the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue presented a blueprint for Evans' work in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*⁶. The two strands of readings, Agee's and Kirstein's, finally

⁶ The important role of Kirstein's interpretations of his work has been emphasized by Evans, who also stated that Kirstein's influence on his photography preceeded that of Agee (Katz 83; see also below). As my discussion indicates, Kirstein's specific perspective on photography may have influenced Evans' work for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in two different ways. On the one hand in the making of the images, e.g. in the specific composition and point of view, which dominates the images, and

came together in William Stott's seminal work from the early seventies on the documentary tradition and American culture in the thirties. Stott's interpretation of Evans' and Agee's work was clearly influenced by the 1960 edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in which Evans' enhanced the number of photographs, even including pictures that had not been taken during the 1936 trip to the South. Evans also inserted an essay on Agee between the image section and the text section of the book. Both revisions were obviously meant to reclaim and enhance the iconographic autonomy of Evans' images and guard their reception against the cult following that had been building around Agee after his death in 1955. In his reading, Stott tried to overcome this barrier which Evans had erected between image and word, in order to find a compelling synthesis for their diverging claims. The result is a powerful iconography of documentary aesthetic, which takes *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as its centerpiece, and has secured the book's cultural aura as a masterwork. My conclusion will look at a more recent attempt to reclaim the documentary aesthetic of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* for a representation of poverty in the American South of today. As I argue, the specific discursive 'aura' of Evans' images and their insistent claim of iconographic autonomy make this attempt an ambitious, but also a rather ambivalent one. But let me start with the specific claim of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

on the other hand in the making of the book, e.g. the decision to separate image and word, and to dispense with titles for the images. The latter clearly refers to Evans' exhibition in 1938, which chronologically falls between the making of the images (1936) and the edition of the book (1939-40).

Efforts in Human Actuality: The Claims of Documentary Realism

The curious history of reception of James Agee's and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is almost as well known as the work itself.⁷ From hostile rejection and neglect during its own time, the book was rediscovered in the sixties, restored to glory in the seventies, and today stands as the classic of a specific American aesthetics of documentary realism, both in photography and in literature. The fact that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has become accepted and admired as no other book from the time as an *artistic document* of the thirties, that is, as the successful merging of realistic and aesthetic modes of perception and expression, assigns to it a special status in the *cultural* history of perception which is dominated and shaped by the reception of images. Thus, what is being documented by the text and the images in the first place is a claim: to present an authentic and therefore legitimate vision of an existing reality or, in Agee's own words: the book is "an effort in human actuality . . . to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defence" (Agee/Evans xiv-xv). If the history of rejection and acceptance can be seen as the movement of the specific vision that informs *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* from the margin to the center of cultural attention and recognition, from illegitimacy and dissidence to legitimacy and canonization, the disconcerting question is whether this holds true not only for the image but also for its subject. For what seems to be the most curious aspect of our 'image' of both Agee's and Evans' work is that we have almost completely lost the sense for the particularity and the human actuality of its initial subject: the existential conditions of poverty, i.e. poverty both as a social and cultural reality and as a historic fact. This is what Agee calls the book's "nominal subject," that is, "North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families" (Agee/Evans xiv).

⁷ See Stott 261-66, and also the discussions in Boeger, Puckett, and Stange. For changing attitude in critical opinion, see the reviews listed below.

As anyone familiar with the 400 pages that follow will acknowledge, this is hardly a conclusive statement of the book's subject and does only scant justice to the sheer scope and exuberance of Agee's effort to 'examine' the living conditions of the three sharecropper families. His attempt to clarify the subject in more fundamental terms sounds equally mysterious: "More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity" (xiv). Yet Agee does not stop here. In his movement from the nominal subject of the book to the more essential claim of representing this subject he finally arrives at something even more unique—the ultimate intention of the work:

Ultimately, it is intended that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided, which lies within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive, and of the spirit to persist in. (xiv-xv)

While this is a truly conclusive statement, it seems nevertheless that whatever sense the reader might have retained of an original subject, it has been absorbed totally by the claim to represent it in its totality. But Agee is quite aware of the precarious status of such a project, and he immediately asserts that "the present volume is merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue" (xv). Indeed, the record Agee and Evans present is "a swindle, an insult, and a corrective" which demands a certain wariness of reception: "the reader will be wise to bear the nominal subject, and his expectation of its proper treatment, steadily in mind" (xv). The reader's caution is well advised because it is exactly the expectations of what a documentary mode of representation should be like "that is the subject with which the authors are dealing, throughout" (xv).

Not one subject, but two: on the one hand cotton tenantry as a social fact and a reality, on the other the reader's expectations of 'its proper treatment,' that is, the various cultural attitudes concerning the correct way of representing social facts or even reality in general. Agee obviously expects that his readers all have a sense for what 'counts' as a real document, and that they will judge his strategy accordingly. Therefore one might argue that the subject that Agee and Evans are "dealing" with throughout the

book is nothing else but the concept of documentary realism itself. Both subjects are to be represented by what is representative: the social fact by the three "representative" white families and the concept of documentary realism by the attitude and the mode of perception inscribed in the text and the photographic images which, in Agee's words, "are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative" (xv). Both modes of representation are also equally precarious. While any record of social reality must remain fragmentary and experimental, the form of the book is also most likely to fail existing cultural expectations of what documentary realism should be like. As Agee explicitly states as a warning, he and Evans "are trying to deal" with their subjects "not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously" (xv).

Thus Agee's and Evans' claim is met with obstacles from the very start, and while their collaborative effort is clearly an inspired one, what haunts *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* most is the spirit of futility: "I feel sure in advance," Agee remarks, "that any efforts, in what follows . . . will be failures" (238). But what is even more remarkable, failure becomes the very hallmark of any attempt to realize a serious and proper treatment of 'unimagined existence' because to fail "is almost as strongly an obligation as an inevitability, in such work," as Agee adds in a footnote (238).

Agee's predicament—which is also the fundamental predicament of the claim of documentary realism—is that the immensity of reality is inexhaustible, which means in turn that it quite literally exhausts language: "the language of 'reality' . . . must in any case be about the heaviest of language." In comparison to the "deftness, keenness, immediacy, speed and subtlety of the 'reality' it tries to reproduce," (236) ordinary language, or even the language of poetry or literature, remain utterly inadequate since "words . . . are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication" because of their "inaccuracy of meaning as well as inaccuracy of emotion" and their "inability to communicate simultaneity with any immediacy" (236). Thus, the falsification of reality through words "greatly impairs the value and the integrity of their achievement" (236-37).

The problem of representation which troubles *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is essentially the incompatibility of the language of the real and the language of culture (human language), which is exactly the reason for the 'dissonance' between the immediate experience of a fact and our "habit[s] in the use of the senses and of language" (241 n). No matter how we talk about reality and what words we use to describe our own experience, or the experience of others, we will never achieve or even recapture the immediacy and intensity of what we attempt to describe: for Agee, language puts us out of touch with reality.

Agee's pessimistic assessment of the deficiencies of language, however, must be seen in contrast to his remarks about photography and the power of the image. The text constantly challenges its readers to compare the discursive overcharge it presents with Evans' images and their apparent lack of superfluous information. In fact, Evans' photographs come to stand in for the reality and the experience which Agee's words struggle so hard to represent. In turn, they become heavily invested with the discursive load that the text discharges. If Agee's prose attempts (and finally fails) to record an experience which is inexhaustible and at the same time unattainable, his text nevertheless serves as an exemplary source for the reception and interpretation of Evans' images. No longer simple documents, the photographs thus assume an almost inexplicable richness of iconographic meanings, which reach towards the abstract, the symbolic, and the allegorical. Yet the successful transfer and extension of discursive meaning to the visual register of representation also relies on the photographs' specific qualities. Evans' images invite this transfer in presenting visual (and discursive) voids, i.e. objects, scenes and faces that appear both barren and enigmatic, self-sufficient and isolated from their context. Whether this specific cooperation between text and images was intended by their authors or not, Agee's prose and his reaction to Evans' images must have had a specific impact on the photographer's own reception of his pictures. Agee's praise of the autonomous discursive force of the photographs must have resonated strongly with Evans' understanding of

photography as a kind of writing, a language of vision.⁸ As Michael Brix remarks: "It is precisely the proclaimed independence of text and pictures that causes them to resonate" (25).

The Language of Vision

If Agee's doubts regarding the fundamental difference between experience and language seem close to our own postmodern sensibility, his attempts to overcome this difference in his style were definitely at odds with the sensibility and the expectations of his own time. The article which Agee wrote after his two-month stay in the South was rejected by the editors of *Fortune*, the magazine that had assigned both Agee and Evans, because it was "pessimistic, unconstructive, impractical, indignant, lyrical, and always personal" (MacDonald qtd. in Stott 262). The expanded version of the article which became *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was equally rejected by Harper and Brothers because Agee refused to revise the manuscript according to the editor's wishes. When the book finally was published in 1941 it was badly reviewed, largely ignored and sold less than 600 copies. Only after Agee's death in 1955 did interest and acceptance begin to grow and the reissue of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1960 was immediately acknowledged as a major achievement and a "classic of journalism and literature" (262). Critical acclaim also led to the close identification of Agee's text with Evans' images and vice versa, which makes the book appear as a unified vision brought about by the complementary force of visual and verbal representation. It seems therefore that today we have finally achieved that competence of reception which for Agee in 1941 was still an illusion: "the illusion of an audience . . . well trained in catching

⁸ As Evans' remarked: "My work happened to be just the style and the matter for [Agee's] eye" (Katz 83). The claim for precedence aside, one could also argue, more realistically, that both Evans and Agee consciously or unconsciously saw their own representation of the 'human actuality' they had experienced in relation to and in the light of that of the other, respectively.

what is thrown: an audience to whom the complex joke [Agee's ironic phrase for reality] can simply be told" (Agee/Evans 236).

Part of the irony of the 'joke' is, of course, that on the one hand *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has finally gained recognition because it has been accepted as a work of art—against Agee's warning: "in God's name don't think of it as Art" (15). On the other, the book's tremendous—if late—success is also due to the solution of the initial problem which Evans' images in contrast to Agee's prose seemed to offer: closing the gap between unmediated experience and its representation. If we are a more 'well trained' audience it is also because we have been trained to read photographs differently than Evans' and Agee's contemporaries.

Agee readily acknowledged photography's superiority as a technique of recording 'human actuality' when he said: "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs" (13). The camera, for Agee as for most people of his time, was an agent of truth:

One reason I so deeply care for the camera is just this. So far as it goes . . . handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold, some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, it is . . . incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth. (211)

If today we would hardly share Agee's sentiment it all the more clearly points to the historical moment of cultural perception which makes this sentiment possible and which has so fundamentally shaped the reception of Evans' images. Because in contrast to Agee, Evans almost immediately gained acceptance with his representation of poverty in the South as "normal predicaments to human divinity" (xiv). This acceptance was not only rooted in the belief of the camera's superiority as a proper mode of recording, it was also, and more to the point, the result of the specific way in which Evans' images exactly met those expectations that Agee's text, at least in the thirties and forties, confronted and insulted.

What is especially interesting in regard to the problematic relation between word and image in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is that Agee's attitudes towards the superiority of the camera and the inferior power of words are reflected and in a way inverted by Evans' attitude towards his

own work with the camera. Against Agee's desire to achieve in his prose the self-sufficient eloquence of photography, to transcend the limitations of writing, Evans expresses exactly the opposite desire: to turn photography into writing. In a later interview he named Flaubert and Baudelaire as major influences on his work and he added:

Photography . . . doesn't really interest me. I do know that I want to do something with it though. . . . I thought [photography] was a substitute for something else—well, for writing, for one thing, I wanted to write. (qtd. in Ward 115; Katz 83-84)

In terms of the ambitions of its authors, then, *Let Us Nor Praise Famous Men* is beset with yet another paradox: written by a poet who would rather be a photographer and photographed by a visual artist who aspired to be a writer, the book challenges 'proper' modes of seeing and of writing in turning the respective media—words and images—into their opposites. This strategy of denial may be the source of the sheer force that both the text and the pictures unfold and yet it also binds them together as complements: they are indeed 'mutually independent and fully collaborative.' However, while Agee's prose even today insists—in some parts at least—on its denial of legibility as a record or document (one might only attempt to read certain passages in reference to their alleged subject), this does not hold for Evans' photographs which have become fully legible texts in their own right. Yet, the difference between Evans' mode of photographic writing and various photographic documents from the thirties becomes clearer in comparison to the work of other photographers, especially those who, like Evans, worked for the FSA—the agency of the New Deal government specifically founded to assemble and establish an official canon of visual texts. One has to emphasize that the main motivation behind the work of the historical section of the RSA/FSA was economical and political. The images were clearly meant to support the official policies of the New Deal government in showing their effectiveness and their success.⁹

⁹ See Daniel, Hurley, Fleischhauer, Stange, Gassner for FSA politics and objectives. Trachtenberg offers a close analysis of the construction of the FSA files ("From Image to Story"). A great part of the photographs can be viewed on the internet at

Even though the documentary work of the FSA is without parallel by its sheer scope and variety of subject—over 270,000 photographs—, it presents only the official version of a more general interest in and the production of documentary books and images. During the thirties the illustrated documentary book flourished and became a genre of its own with sales numbers that matched those of other bestsellers. Examples include Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937); Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* (1938), a poem with photographs by FSA photographers; Dorothea Lange's collaboration with the economist Paul Schuster Taylor *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939); and Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), specifically dealing with the history and experience of black Americans from southern slavery to the Great Migration to the North and, again, illustrated with images from the FSA files. While these books differed in content and motive as well as in the specific textual strategies they used to make the pictures 'talk,' they were alike in their insistent claim that what they presented was a true account of American reality.¹⁰ And while these books were considered rather controversial they were also very successful—much in contrast to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. However, in comparison to the images used in those books, Evans' photographs achieved even greater success because they were almost immediately recognized not merely as 'true' documentary images but as works of art. The reason for this success lies in the particular way Evans' images resist and at the same time invite words; if they speak at all they speak with the 'language of vision,' as Evans explained later in an 1969 article on photography:

The meaning of quality in photography's best pictures lies written in the language of vision. That language is learned by chance, not system Our overwhelming formal education deals in words, mathematical figures, and methods of rational thoughts, not images. This may be a form of conspiracy that promises artificial

[http://www. memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/](http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/) (the site also presents a bibliography and related information on the documentary work of the FSA).

¹⁰ See Puckett, Greif, Stange, and Stott for a discussion of the genre.

blindness. . . . It is this very blindness that photography attacks, blindness that is ignorance of real seeing and is perversion of seeing. (qtd. in Puckett 113)

The implicit gesture of this definition is to deny discursive intrusion or domination of the image in favor of a new mode of seeing. A close look at the specific strategies of representation which Evans' used reveals how this 'real seeing' becomes a language of its own and therefore demands to be read on its own terms.

American Photographs

In 1938, two years after his collaboration with Agee and one year after he had left the Historical Section of the FSA—due to controversy with Ron Stryker and Evans' resistance to the 'official doctrine' of documentary realism—Evans exhibited his work in the Museum of Modern Art under the title "American Photographs." It was not the first instance that the museum had featured Evans' work, yet he would later always emphasize that it was the first one-man show of a living photographer in the museum's prestigious setting.¹¹ Whatever modesty the title might suggest for us today, it was recognized by Evans' contemporary Lincoln Kirstein as "an extravagant claim for a young artist in relation to a subject as vast as contemporary American civilization" (Evans, *American Photographs* 193). The argument echoes Agee's spirit of futility in face of the inexhaustibility of reality, yet where Agee's words had to fail, Evans' images did succeed brilliantly:

after looking at these pictures with all their clear, hideous and beautiful detail, their open insanity and pitiful grandeur, compare this *vision of a continent as it is*, . . . with any other coherent vision that we have had since the war. (193, emphasis added)

Evans' photographs speak the language of reality 'as it is' and while the description might almost be taken as a visual rendering of Agee's prose—for whom the hideous was part of the beautiful—the images possess something which Agee's exuberance lacks: "Evans' work has . . . intention,

¹¹ Evans' photographs were exhibited in the MoMA's 1933 exhibition "Photographs of Nineteenth-Century Houses." See Jackson.

logic, continuity, climax, sense and perfection" (193). Thus, Evans achieves with his images what Agee's text did not: the legitimacy of its claim, the essentiality and completeness of his vision of social reality:

It is for him to fix and show the *whole aspect of our society*, the sober portrait of its stratifications, their backgrounds and embattled contrasts. . . . Walker Evans is giving us the *contemporary civilization of eastern America* and its dependencies . . . (192-93, emphasis added)

The curious geographical denomination, however, shows that the legitimate vision which the "disembodied burrowing eye" (196) casts on reality serves a specific angle of cultural perception, an established perspective of historical continuity, "a way of seeing which has appeared persistently throughout the American past" (198). Such a way of seeing—whose most characteristic feature is purity or even puritanism, as Kirstein calls it—does not waste a speculative glance at social and economic particularities; Evans' and Kirstein's vision is as thrifty as it is generous: "[a] sophisticated, yet unaffected eye" which "prizes the naive for the sake of its pure though accidental vision, not for the paucity of its technical means" (194-95).

In Kirstein's view, Walker Evans' American photographs represented a true and at the same time artistic portrait of American civilization—Eastern American civilization, to be precise. Whatever each of these images stood for in itself, as a whole *American Photographs* came to stand for a specific way of seeing which subsumed cultural, regional and social differences under a notion of national and cultural identity and historical continuity. Thus the pictures are 'taken' twice over: the diverse moments of individual experience become the material for a unified mode of collective experience; the images as a whole are turned into a capital which can be appropriated and reinvested into a dominant (i.e. a 'historically persistent') way of seeing. One cannot underestimate the force of Kirstein's interpretation of Evans' images. Like Agee, Kirstein offered a certain perspective on the photographs which would unfold their discursive potential—their story—before the spectators' eyes. Evans' later acknowledged that Kirstein basically revealed the real meaning of his work: "It's hard to believe, but I

say the man was essentially explaining to me just what I was doing in my work" (Katz 83). But while Agee's reading of the photographs for a good part relied on his own experience of the specific reality these photographs were meant to document, Kirstein's reading reproduces his dominantly *aesthetic* experience of the photographs by giving them a new, and more universal referent. But this reading does not only result from Kirstein's subjective attitude towards photography, it also reacts to the visual strategies employed by Evans: the composition and combination of the images. The logic and legitimacy of appropriation that informs both the images and their appraising perception relies heavily on strategies of de-contextualization, i.e. the isolation of the individual fact from its historical and social relations, and a new order of perception that draws its logic and legibility solely from the internal and relational composition of the images.

The most effective feature of the exhibition and quite a novelty at the time was the strict separation of image and word: the photographs were presented without captions or comments. Instead, the visitors had to refer to a list of the images at the end of each of the two sections. These tables gave a very short description of the content together with a more or less specific place name, and the year the image had been taken. The images were listed in the order as they appeared, an order that clearly followed compositional preferences rather than chronological or geographical patterns. As a result, the continuity and context of the images as they are exhibited is emphasized while the context and the continuity of the real experience from which they had been taken is broken down and deemphasized. On the one hand, this meant that the single image became isolated as a heightened moment of experience which had to be read on its own terms, on the other, the refusal of verbal information also prepared for the emergence of new relations between the images: a compositional structure that makes the images more readable according to their internal properties such as motive or composition: "Modes of synthesis of individual photographs are suggested by similar subjects and obvious contrasts" (Ward 117). In other words, the sequence of the images and their internal relations estab-

lishes a kind of grammar which lends to the sheer variety and unconnectedness of the represented moments an overarching 'intention, logic, and continuity.' The two sections of the exhibition are thus carefully edited around two distinctive central topics; the first dealing mainly with portraits of individuals and groups with some interiors, the second focusing on houses, factories, and exterior scenes. Alan Trachtenberg has called attention to the emphasis on seeing as reading, which such a sequential ordering suggests—an effect that is certainly even stronger in the catalogue where seeing and reading are intimately entwined by the medium of the book.¹²

American Photographs, J. A. Ward has noted, "insists on disconnectedness—of person and person, person and house, person and work." Thus the continuity of real experience is lost: "[s]uch disjointedness results in photographs noticeably absent of the complexity created when individuals interact with their environment and with one another" (130). Whatever holds these images together and the people and places that appear in the images is an imposed order or arrangement, one that comes through the act of photographing as a method of recording. In fact, it is the formation of vision through the process of image making that is alluded to in the very first images of *American Photographs*. As Alan Trachtenberg has remarked, these images present "a pointed discourse on the photographic image . . . insist[ing] on the inscriptive rather than transcriptive aspect of the camera, on its service as a kind . . . of writing" ("Walker Evans' America" 65). What is equally obvious, even though Trachtenberg does not mention this, is the insistence on the aspect of legibility; Evans clearly invites the eye to read.

¹² The catalogue presents only a selection of the photographs exhibited, whether they follow the same sequence or not can only be inferred. Even Trachtenberg's influential readings refer mainly to the book without clearing up this point. Thus he interprets the effects of the opening sequence of six photographs, making some important points in regard to the 'textuality' of the contrasts and combinations between the images. However, it is unclear whether this effect is an exclusive feature of the book, or of the exhibition as well ("Walker Evans' America"; *Reading*).



From: *American Photographs* 1. Walker Evans, *License Photo Studio*. 1934. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lincoln Kirstein, 1950. (50.539.12) © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The first of the American photographs presents an obvious reflection on photography in its crudest form as a record of personal identity and as a commodity. A place (a studio) where photographs for automobile licenses are made—with the word 'photographs' appearing repeatedly in our field of vision, calling attention immediately to the dominance of language in a fully commercialized visual environment. This is clearly a form of image-making which Evans' found ridiculous, and certainly inferior as a form of 'documentation.' The blatant commercialism of the reiterated advertisement is countered by Evans'

careful composition, the selection of angle and focal length and the emphasis on the empty surroundings: there are no customers—not even an automobile in sight. The appeal of the image is obviously futile and does not attract our eyes enough to follow its demand to 'enter'. Whatever meaning we might come up with, and there are surely more than one, each interpretation has to rely on the legibility and cultural significance of the signs within the image. More precisely, the image already presumes the collaboration of words and images, challenging the spectator to reflect on this collaboration, and to read Evans' image as a commentary on the relation between verbal and visual representations.

The self-reflective quality of the first image is carried over into the second, one of Evans' most famous pictures: the window display of a pennypicture photostudio in Savannah, Georgia (taken in 1936, the year of Evans' visit to the south). Here, the sheer diversity and variety of personal identity is almost totally swallowed up by the all too obvious pattern of repetition. No matter how different these people might be in reality their faces are displayed in such a monotone manner—enforced not only by the



From: *American Photographs 2*. Walker Evans, *Photographer's window of penny portraits*. Birmingham, Alabama. 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF342-T01-008097-A1]

grid-like structure of images of the same size but also in the overwhelming similarities of an seemingly infinite sequence of smiling frontal views—that any sense of individual identity gets lost. Evans commented on the happy coincidence the displayed arrangement of pictures offered for his 'real seeing' which points to the underlying strategy of his own work to present the disconnectedness of individuality in a format which stresses conformity and order through compositional means alone. And yet, there is an element of deep irony in the word 'Studio,' which serves as a subtitle to the picture, because it not only refers to the mere fact of the commercial production of images but also

stands as the Latin expression of the 'I study' (a pun that can hardly be avoided): the challenge to the eye of the beholder to move beyond conformity and reassert through close examination—the 'studio'—the identity of each of the persons. The difference between the commercial studio and the 'studio' of the examining eye is exactly the difference between a seeing that takes the photograph for granted as a visual truth, and a seeing in Evans' sense, which 'reads' the picture as it reads a text for study. The reading of Evans' "language of vision" starts with an act of discrimination of meaningful differences and the willingness to turn one's eye to every detail of the image, which might assume a crucial significance for a reading of the differences. If the first two images of *American Photographs* set the stage for the reading eye, they also stress the problematic relation between words and images. Note, for instance, the dominant presence of letters and inscriptions in both photographs. Evans has

become notorious for his proclivity for advertisement signs, letters, worn-out posters, and inscriptions, which more than often turn his images into a feast for the reading eye.¹³ The effect is in most cases a triggering off of our most basic reflexes when it comes to a combination of images and words. It is almost as if we could not help reading the signs as a literal comment to what is being seen, and even if the effect is ironic or funny the image assumes its own 'textuality' almost without effort. The people in another image for instance become mere illustrations of a general advertising mood: the equally emphatic and ludicrous appraisal of products and a 'for sale' attitude that even appears to pervade the innocent gesture of the small girl in the open doorway who presents herself to the onlooking eye in her 'best pose.' It is significant that this picture presents a rare instant where person and place are not disconnected and yet what the image displays is obviously not meant to be a moment of everyday experience but, rather, a unique moment of posing, of self-advertisement. *This* moment exists only for the camera: note for instance how the tension between mobility and stasis is used to emphasize the moment of seeing/reading.



From: *American Photographs* 35. Walker Evans, *Roadside Stand near Birmingham, Alabama*. 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF342-T01-008253 DLC]

The advertisement for the moving company expresses the high mobility of persons and even houses and thus implies place or location as transient, rather, than specific categories. Yet, at the same time, it points to tradition and reliability, while the announcement of 'Today's Special' again emphasizes the notion of change and instability, which is stressed even further by the obvious effort of the boy on the

¹³ See the exhibition of Evans' photographs dealing with these phenomena, called *Signs*.



From: *Walker Evans America*
 37. Walker Evans, *Household supply store. Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. 1935.* Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF342-T01-001161-A].

right to balance the huge pumpkin just long enough for the moment of exposure.

As in the smiling faces and the groomed style of the penny picture image, we are confronted with a doubling of images: a representation of a representation, twice removed from immediate experience—our own and that of the people pictured.¹⁴ This strategy of double representation already stresses the latent potential of the visual as text; the image of a window display, for instance, immediately calls attention to the manner of arrangement, even of composition with which the products of the hardware store have been assembled to attract the eye of the potential customers. Similar to the picture of

the roadside store the strong and obvious composition—framing, delineation, sharp focus—serves to underline the quality of performance, of presentation already inherent in the real scene. Here, the effect is stressed by the reflection of the window pane which acts as a distancing screen between the eye and the objects seen. Evans does not *make* a picture, he *takes* a picture which is already there.

Thus, we have several basic strategies which Evans employed in *American Photographs* to turn his images into a language of vision: the rejection of supplementary verbal information, the emphasis and inclusion

¹⁴ On the doubling in Evans' images, see Trachtenberg, "Walker Evans' America." For Trachtenberg, Evans stresses the status of the image as "made-over" in order to make the spectator aware of the deliberate construction of visual reality in the act of representation. However, in my view, Evans also uses this pointed mode of representation in order to give those images a much more powerful impact, which do not focus on such "made-over" subjects—for instance, his images of houses, persons captured unawares, empty stairways and hallways, etc. In images like these, Evans'

of letters, inscriptions and signs in the pictures, the disconnection of person, place and time (real time), and, finally, the emphasis on the performative or symbolic quality of visual reality. Taken together, these features work to ensure a panoramatic view of individual moments of visual experience which are held together by compositional elements such as framing pictures (the first and final images), repetitive patterns (within single images and between several images—e.g. the houses) and the recurrence and emphasis of signs or language in the pictures.

The effect is very different from that of Agee's text in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Where Agee's attempt at detailed description was aimed at the specificity of the local and the individual, the panoramatic strategy of Evans' exhibition subordinates the individual to the general, individual difference to general diversity (and diversity to compositional unity) which turns every factual detail into the service of a universal meaning. As Kirstein states, the images become "living citations . . . serious symbols allied in disparate chaos." What Evans does for America, in Kirstein's view, is "elevating the casual, the everyday and the literal into specific, permanent symbols" (196-97).

Of course, this last aspect at least holds for Agee's stylistic strategies as well as for Evans' elevating vision of the everyday and the literal. It suggests that in order to be transformed into cultural meaning and to achieve a certain permanence and importance for that 'persisting way of seeing' human actuality has to be transcended, i.e. raised, dignified and purified. Thus Evans' images open up a discursive space for the aesthetization of poverty; their iconographic autonomy allows the spectator to keep in comfortable distance to the immediate subject of the image, concentrating instead on the formal composition and pictorial logic of the representation. While for Kirstein the look inscribed in the image was that of a "disembodied *burrowing* eye," a generation later the cultural perception of Evans'

stresses the power of the photographer to find and fix a moment of unadulterated visual truth, not yet "made-over."

photographs would radicalize its transactional relations with the image even more.

Documents Into Art: The Aesthetics of Poverty

Even though Evans' images thus won early praise they scarcely helped to achieve equal recognition for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Partly due to the 'unruliness' of the accompanying prose, the failure of both text and images to attract an audience in the forties was also the result of a shift of public attention from internal to external affairs, especially the war with Japan and in Europe. However, since the images played an important role for the rediscovery of the book during the sixties and seventies, the exhibition of 1938 and the images in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* deserve to be compared—especially in regard to the question how a photographic document of poverty can be read as a work of art.

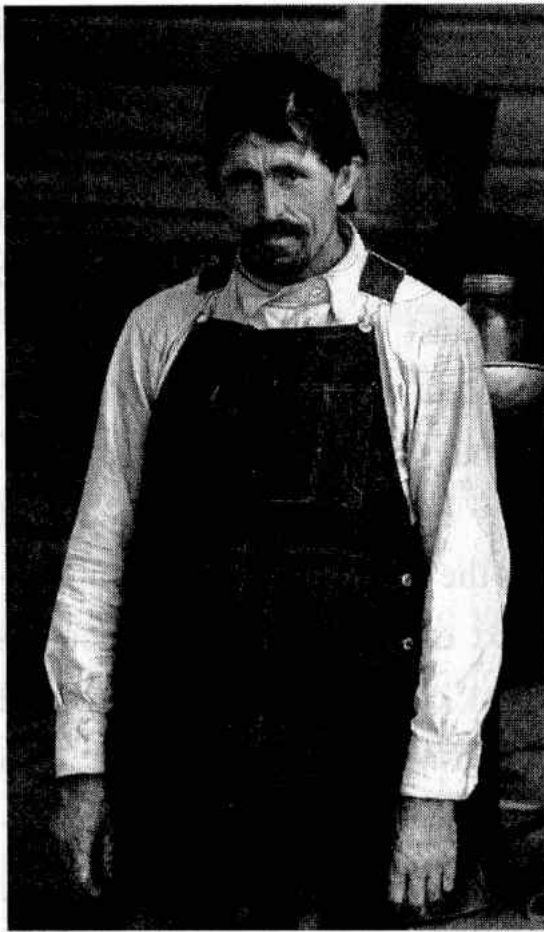
Several of the images which Evans included in his "American Photographs" exhibition were made during his collaboration with Agee in 1936. Yet in the context of the universal diversity of the American Scene the historical and local moment of experience—the 'simultaneity and immediacy' of the individual fact within the context of everyday experience—is



From: *American Photographs* 22. Walker Evans, *Sunday Singing*. 1935 or 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-US Z62-T01-99131]

almost completely lost. The three photographs which Evans took from the large number of photographs he had made while visiting the three sharecropper families carefully avoid any significant and visible reference to the 'predicament' of poverty. Two of them, almost generically titled "Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife" and "Alabama Tenant Farmer Family Singing Hymns," respectively, are

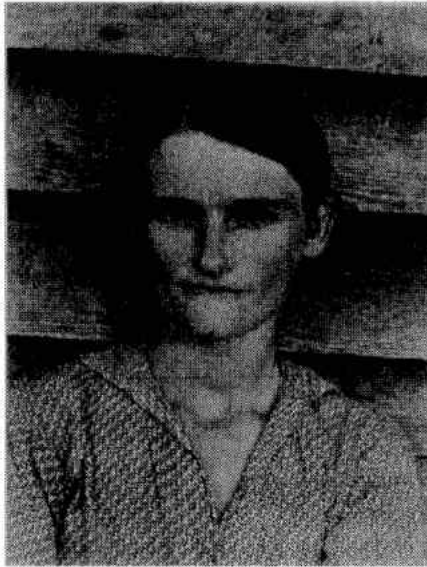
cropped versions from the original series.¹⁵ What we see in the latter, is obvious enough, especially in regard to the title: a tenant family singing hymns, presumably on a Sunday. But in comparison to the section in the book which deals with the Tenge family (called Ricketts in the book), the image included in the exhibition (but not in the book) presents a rather unrepresentative moment in the life of a sharecropper family. Their life, after all, was dominated by the hard work of cotton farming under the most extreme and inhuman conditions imaginable, and yet here we see the family united in religious activity, devoted to reading and singing praise—an ac-



Walker Evans, *Frank Tenge, cotton sharecropper. Hale County, Alabama. 1935 or 1936.* Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF342-T01-008154-A DLC].

tivity, in short, that most of the visitors of the exhibition could easily relate to even if they had absolutely no knowledge about tenant farming and the inhumanity of sharecropping. Familiarity and recognition thus obscures the social and economic difference of experience between existential conditions in the South and cultural conditions in the North. The difference becomes visible again if we compare the exhibited image of the bespectacled father in his Sunday clothes with his image as he appeared in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Suddenly we see the strain of physical labor and the experience of poverty even though we are still far removed from it, kept at a distance by the skeptical glance of the tenant farmer.

¹⁵ All images taken from his FSA work were cropped or scaled by Evans for the exhibition.



Walker Evans, *Allie Mae Burroughs, wife of cotton sharecropper. Hale County, Alabama. 1935 or 1936.* Library of Congress, Prints & Photo-graphs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF 342-T01-008139-A DLC].

The second image, though very different from the family picture, nevertheless works according to the same strategies of reduction and isolation. All we see is a face, exposed in almost ultimate clarity to the eye of the beholder, without any information about the place except for the barren wood planks, which serve as a stabilizing background to the portrait. Yet, because of the rigorous framing and the invisibility of any information beyond that frame, the image is no longer connected to its living context, rather, it is free to be read according to a very different iconographic script: the context of north-eastern culture and history, as Evans own 'reading' testifies: "That sharecropper's wife is a classic portrait of a

real, old pioneering, American woman of English stock, and pure, too" (qtd. in Brix 14). The 'real, old pioneering, American woman' was twenty-seven years old when Evans took her picture, and whatever she may have known about or cared for what it meant to be 'pure,' she certainly knew more about what it meant to be 'poor.' However, it is the purity rather than the poverty of the subject which comes to present the iconographic message of the image, as W. J. T. Mitchell's reading of the portrait exemplifies:

The portrait of Annie Mae Gudger . . . becomes a purely formal study of flatness and worn, "graven" surfaces: the lines of her face, the weathered grain of the bords, the faded dress, the taut strands of her hair, the gravity of her expression all merge into a visual complex that is hauntingly beautiful and enigmatic. She becomes an "icon" . . . a pure aesthetic object, liberated from contingency and circumstance into a space of pure contemplation, the Mona Lisa of the Depression. (293-94)

It is precisely the lack of contextual information that opens the image for the richness of potential ('enigmatic') meaning, and turns it into an inexhaustible source for cultural interpretations and aesthetic value. In the

absence of visible referential clues, which would link the image and its subject to an external reality of 'contingency and circumstance,' each internal detail becomes highly charged with meaning. A crucial transformation takes place, turning the image of the share cropper's wife into an icon, which for cultural perception and memory stands for an entire historical period.

Yet how do Evans' photographs transform social facts into cultural artifacts, to help the claim of documentary realism succeed in its aesthetic appropriation of reality as a work of art? Again, the process relies on the alignment of visual features and perceptual attitudes with discursive ascriptions. It is in fact a more rigorous expansion of the aesthetic dimensions into the realm of mystification. This mystification is well captured in William Stott's designation of the "stubbornly enigmatic" character of Evans' documentary photographs (274).¹⁶ For Stott, the documentary aesthetics introduced and realized by Evans' images

made the lives of the lower classes aesthetically respectable (which is *full* respectability these days, so highly do we value "art"). He has shown that the "underprivileged" have a beauty in their lives and, on this account at least, may be spared anyone's tears. Evans has returned them a dignity that welfare workers, radicals, social scientists, propagandists, the media, and liberals of all stripes have too often taken away in hope of promoting their social betterment. (277)

Stott's description from the early 1970s already expresses a state of cultural acceptance which Evans' images had gained since the thirties. At the same time, however, one senses that the increasing acknowledgement which came after the reissue of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1960 was clearly not based on a cultural consensus, especially in regard to the legitimacy of Evans' vision of poverty. Whereas Evans' early reviewers sought to recognize the aesthetic function of documentary photography in aligning Evans' style to an indigenous tradition in the visual arts and in literature, the critical reception after the 1960s edition of Agee's and Evans' book attempted to emphasize or even defend the social and critical function of the images against their aesthetic (i.e. formal) reading.

¹⁶ For the enigmatic quality of Evans' photographs see Taube.

This attempt is characterized more than anything else by the recurrent motive of poverty as a lack of social resources versus dignity as an individual possession and a resource of aesthetic value; that is, the problem of the legitimacy or the representativeness of vision is explicitly negotiated in economic terms. In his seminal work on documentary realism in the thirties, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, Stott stated that the most characteristic mark of poverty that the tenants display is their inability to disguise themselves, to hide their lack from the camera and the eye of the beholder:

these people *are* simple: they are *there*, unhidden; complexities and all, they are visible. What one sees, looking at them and the things they touch, is an incapacity to dissemble. They and their lives are wholly exposed. . . . These people are simple . . . because their means and purposes of deception are so obvious and rudimentary. . . . The poor, the primitive, and the young are the natural heroes of photography; all others have learned too much disguise. (274)

The cultural eye of the seventies no longer holds photography as a guarantee for truth, since even the camera can find truth only where it cannot be concealed: truth is found in the lack of social disguises and pretensions. Because they have neither the means nor the intention to use their visibility as a social tool, the tenants allow the photographer to capture a most general and fundamental truth: "Their lives . . . are uncovered to view and, in them, the essentials of the human condition" (Stott 274-75).

The very conditions of poverty become the preconditions for the visible presence of truth—claiming the essentials of the human condition also means to legitimize documentary photography as a mode of cultural appropriation. The image appears to be a medium of exchange, rather than representation, that allows for transactions between the sphere of social economics and the sphere of cultural meaning. Thus, an almost magical transformation of values can take place since in the very act of dispossession and of exposure, poverty becomes a most valuable property:

Most photographers have used the visibility of 'simple people' either to expose social problems or to make sentimental observations. . . . Evans, however, does

something else. Rather than show how simple the poor are, how feeble, how limited, he shows them to be complex, strong, and pervasive. He uses their poverty to demonstrate how much they possess. (275)

But what do those poor, simple sharecroppers really possess? Certainly nothing that would make them wealthy in the economic or even in the social sense, and certainly nothing that would count in the eyes of their more fortunate audience as tangible, usable or even exchangeable valuables.¹⁷ And yet their property is of infinite value and rareness because it is the unity of self and existence: "all they touch, and all that touches them, is permeated with their being," a unity that does not rely on opportunities but on the explicit lack of self-expression: "whereas the prosperous attenuate their selfhood through many possessions and roles, the poor condense theirs in a few." By the very virtue of necessity, the tenants not only acquire the identity and unity of a meaningful self, their life turns into a work of art: "Their world and everything in it bespeaks them, symbolizes them. It is entirely a work of art" (Stott 275).

This transformation of poverty (economic, social) into cultural value and meaning (art) depends on the careful and deliberate composition of the image, which for Evans included the rearrangement of objects in order to make the visual readable as an artistic text. "I can't stand a bad design or a bad object in a room," he once remarked (Katz 85), and accordingly what appears to be a photographic record of the actual and the factual is a carefully composed, artistic image of arranged simplicity. As has been noticed by many readers, Evans' desire for the proper arrangement in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* often clashes with Agee's obsessive observation of the actual.¹⁸ By moving, or even removing objects from the scene as found, sometimes working on the resulting image to polish or

¹⁷ The few possessions of the sharecropper families occupy a very prominent place in Agee's text and in Evans' images, who found the arrangement and the particular care with which even the most banal objects were treated especially intriguing.

¹⁸ See for instance Curtis, who points out several discrepancies between visual depiction and verbal description. Curtis finds Evans' interventions with the actual acceptable as necessary corrections in the service of aesthetic enrichment.

purify surfaces, e.g. turning a stained bedspread into immaculate whiteness, Evans not only cleared his photographs of aesthetically disturbing elements, thus creating an ordered space of contemplation in an otherwise rather cluttered universe of things and persons. He also opened the visual space for a discourse of appreciation, dignifying the humble objects by their revealed underlying artistic arrangement. The transformation of image into icon thus also asks for the evaluation of objects and persons in terms of their formal value, which contributes in no small measure to the aesthetization of what is represented.

The magic economy of this cultural perception, however, is deeply flawed since the property which is acclaimed in the very visibility of the poor in turn remains invisible to them. Thus, they cannot claim what they possess; the value of their lives remains 'tragic,' and "tragic twice over: because of the abominable conditions in which it grows, and because it cannot be recognized or appreciated by those who create it" (Stott 271). If this economic reading of Evans' photographs remains paradoxical it is because the legitimacy of cultural perception is indeed a 'burrowing eye;' it endows the poor with a possession that they can never claim for their own use. In fact, whatever profit the transactions of this cultural exchange of values might accrue, they cannot and will not be shared or re-invested. For Agee, this exchange was abominable and disgraceful, made possible only by "a shameful and thief's right." The "privilege of perception" which Evans' images offer those who may appreciate poverty without suffering it, could be justified for Agee only by the recognition of the "ugliness and disgrace" (Agee/Evans 203) implied in it. On all accounts, Evans' was obviously never plagued by Agee's catholic contrition, yet, the question of ethical justification never stopped to haunt the aesthetics of documentary photography and its critical appreciation.¹⁹

¹⁹ Mitchell takes specific pains to address the question in his reading of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. While his interpretation, as the passage quoted earlier indicates, still follows Stott's in emphasizing the enigmatic beauty of the images, he cannot not accept Stott's straightforward assessment, that the aesthetic dimension

The Historical Eye: Rediscovering Poverty

As we have seen, Evans' images have been perceived—read—at different periods for various purposes or meanings. We have also noted how these specific readings have been supported by Evans' compositional strategies of isolation, reduction and visual purification. These images insist on their iconographic autonomy, i.e. they demand to be read on their own terms. *Their* terms, precisely, not those of their subjects or of their context: in foregrounding their formal qualities, their arrangement and composition, aesthetic value claims priority over documentary function. The discursive transformation of poverty into purity marks the high point of the images' institution as cultural icons. However, there is a downside to this magic economy of documentary aesthetics. No matter how sincerely these images are introduced as realistic documents of depravity and despair during the Depression, their aesthetic potential moves their subjects out of their time and place. More importantly, the education of the eye, which Evans propagated, has an irreversible logic. Once we have been trained to recognize the signature of Evans' documentary aesthetics, we respond almost unconsciously to its discursive demands; this language of vision has become our second language. In order to demonstrate this point, I would like to draw attention to one of the latest re-visions of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Dale Maharidge's and Michael Williamson's book from 1989, *And Their Children After Them*. Maharidge's text and Williamson's images are an attempt to reclaim the documentary function of Evans' aesthetic—an attempt that is provocative, disturbing, ambitious, and deeply ambivalent. As the title suggests, the authors quite consciously

radicalizes the inherent political message of the images (and of the book in general). For Mitchell, Evans' ethical vision rests completely on the fact that Evans refuses to make his photographs subservient to any political iconography of the poor. Like Trachtenberg, who also stresses Evans' disinterestedness as a way to deny ideological instrumentalization, Mitchell suggests that the aesthetics of documentary photography must involve ethical justification. Yet his conclusion that the evasion of politics might suffice reduces the ethical question to a special concept of aesthetic contemplation and Kantian disinterestedness.

conceived of their collaboration as a sequel to Agee's and Evans' effort in human actuality. Although by no means the first to do so, Maharidge and Williamson managed to trace the forgotten history of the three tenant families, their children and grandchildren, within the larger context of the rise and fall of cotton farming in the South so successfully that their book received the Pulitzer Prize in 1990. Obviously this was also due to the fact that the two journalists, who worked for the *Sacramento Bee* so closely followed the format of their famous predecessor. As in *Let Us Now Praise*



Left: From: *And Their Children After Them* 3. Above: Walker Evans, *Margaret Ricketts* 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF342-T01-008139-A DLC] Below: Michael Williamson *Margaret Ricketts* 1986.

Right: From: *And Their Children After Them* 5. Above: Walker Evans, *Lucille Burroughs, daughter of a cotton sharecropper. Hale County Alabama.* 1935 or 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF 342-T01-008139-A DLC] Below: Michael Williamson, *Parvin, a Daughter of Maggie Louise* 1986. Both pages are reprinted by permission of Dale Maharidge, Michael Williamson, and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.

Famous Men, Williamson's black-and-white photographs bear no captions and are assembled without commentary as the first and independent part of the volume.

The references to Evans are not only emphasized by formal properties—especially lighting and a certain sparseness of compositional interference—but also by the choice of subject matter: churches, garages, run down houses and the wreckage of automobiles. More explicitly, Williamson pairs some of his images with photographs by Evans as they appeared in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Maharidge's text, which makes up the main part of the book, while remaining in respectful distance to Agee's stylistic experiments, is nevertheless filled with references that call on the reader's memory of the older book.

Formal congruity is also emphasized by the list of characters in the back—which uses the fictitious names of the original families and adds another black tenant family—and the quotes from secondary sources, a technique which Agee had employed as well. According to the authors', these similarities should not be mistaken as a mere imitation, or, even worse, exploitation of the original. As Maharidge explains in his preface:

While this book is in no way intended to imitate, parody, or otherwise denigrate the work of Agee and Evans, there may be those who will be upset that we seem to be tampering with, or exploiting *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. . . . This book certainly starts from the study on which *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is based, but its purpose and scope is different. Agee, beyond being a journalist, was a poet; I am not. . . . My effort is offered as the report of a journalist who struggled to retain his detachment. At the risk of oversimplifying the difference between the two works, I offer that I saw my proper role as standing back and observing and that Agee saw his as jumping in and experiencing.

I believe the two works can coexist. (xxii-xxiii)

There are two things about this disclaimer, which are especially interesting. First, Maharidge's insistence on the difference between the original and its legacy rests on the distinction between poetry and journalism. This distinction is then translated into opposing attitudes or relations towards the subject of the book: while Agee the poet presumably desired to become immersed in experience, Maharidge the journalist struggles to 'retain his

detachment' by keeping the distance of observation. Of course, the implication is that Maharidge does not want to make any claims for the aesthetic merit of his text, at the same time, however, he at least implies that a journalistic temper may result in a more objective document or record. What is more, the distinction follows a logic which had already been called upon during Agee's and Evans' collaboration, where the experiencing poet found his counterpart in the more distant and observing Evans, the man with the camera. If Maharidge is closer to Evans than to Agee, Williamson's images start out as deliberate imitations of Evans' subject, composition and style. The reaction at first must be bewilderment: how is this, how can this be the same street, the same woman at the same table, washing the same dishes, the same girl's face with the same defiant stare in her eyes?

It is almost as if the specific cultural perception which Evans' images had so successfully perpetuated and kept alive until today could return to the original point of view only to be confronted with the continuity of its invisible history. But if these contemporary sights clearly show the passage of time, the aging of the individuals, the change of styles in housing and cars, the conscious similarity between the present and the past as it becomes visible in the images, nevertheless suggests how little actually has changed. Thus the first and most intriguing effect of Williamson's photographs is a sense of *déjà-vu* (in the literal sense: as seen before); the people seem vaguely familiar, the local scenes despite their specificity become scenes of a more general recognition; one is tempted to read a sense of the past even into those images that have no point of reference in the thirties. If the spirit that haunted *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was the spirit of futility, its sequel seems haunted by a spirit of nostalgic yearning, equally futile.²⁰

This sense of the recognition, the recapture, and the return of original vision is quite obvious in Maharidge's account of the decisive moment when the "America of the imagination" suddenly becomes real. While driving through the part of the South where Agee and Evans worked as

'spy and counter-spy' in 1936, the two contemporary agents literally lost their sense of orientation; (the passage deserves a full quotation):

Michael was driving. A mist sat in the road's low spots, too thick for the lights to cut . . . We made a wrong turn and found ourselves driving up the old main street for the first time, the town's center that had been bypassed by the modern road that led to our hotel.

Michael shouted, slamming the brakes. He pulled out our copy of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, turned to one of Evans's pictures and studied it. His memory had served him correctly. We'd stumbled onto the same street that appeared in the photograph. We ran up and down it into the night, book in hand, searching for the very window in which Evans stood and from which he took the picture.

We reached the courthouse and saw . . . that we were beneath the very same Civil War statue under which Agee had first met the men of the three families he lived with. Its identity was confirmed by another Evans picture, and even though it was one in the morning, the discovery caused us to holler and read aloud from the book. (xix-xx)

An almost classical scene of recognition which has not only many literary precursors but also hints at a desire to reconcile image and imagination, icon and reality. It is nothing else than the desire of a tradition in documentary realism that has lost its object (or its subjects) long ago—and which was lost already at the time when Agee and Evans' book returned to visibility in the sixties. Even if Maharidge's and Williamson's claims are much more modest than those of their predecessors, the fact that one has to leave the modern road to recover the historical legitimacy of the cultural vision of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, even more reveals its historicity as a vision forever captured in its own moment of experience.

The exhilarating re-discovery of the real referent—the 'nominal subject'—of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* revigorates our own reception of Evans' photographs. But even though it seems that his images have indeed finally returned to their documentary source—the experience of poverty in the South—what distances us from Williamson's and Maharidge's record of the 'predicament to human divinity' (what maybe distances even them) is the fact that once the documentary image has been

²⁰ Similarly in Tindall, even though for the latter Agee's and Evans' world is 'lost.'

transformed into art, once the image of poverty has been appropriated as a cultural property, it may be difficult to escape the readings that its iconographic scripts impose on our seeing. That is the most disturbing effect of Maharidge's and Williamson's collaboration with their predecessors: the ease with which our culturally trained eye has learned to appreciate images of poverty as icons of purity becomes thoroughly unsettled when our aesthetic expectations clash with the documentary force of the contemporary photographs and the accompanying text. When William Carlos Williams reviewed Evans' *American Photographs* in 1938, he remarked that "[f]irst we have to see, be taught to see," thus implying that these images foremost demanded the suspension of our discursive habits of perception. Today we have to realize that the iconographic autonomy which Evans' images insisted upon, has become part of these habits, as much a discursive as an aesthetic effect we have been trained to appreciate.

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MAREN STANGE

"Not What We Seem": Image and Text in *12 Million Black Voices*.

Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's 1941 photograph and text book *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro* appeared late in the series of books featuring photographs made for the New Deal's Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography project (1935-43), a series which included *American Exodus*, *Land of the Free*, and most notably James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Wright had wished for several years to address African American history "in terms of the urbanization of a feudal folk," as he said; at the same time, FSA exhibit and book designer and erstwhile journalist Rosskam meant to capitalize on the recent, enormous success of Wright's novel *Native Son* both by using Wright to compose the text and by presenting in photographs the wretched conditions of the Chicago Black Belt described in the novel.

Wright's text is emphatically historical, beginning with an account of the slave trade set in the context of both African civilizations and the Euro-American Renaissance and following the course of slavery as an economic system to the point of the Civil War, when the inevitability of industrialization made slaves and the "inheritors of slavery" seem "children of a devilish aberration, descendants of an interval of nightmare in history, fledglings of a period of amnesia . . ." Writing in the present tense to detail the sharecrop system, African American life in the South, and the Great Migration of the Teens and Twenties, Wright inserts an italicized sermon prophesizing a new Jerusalem to dramatize the prospective migrants' "reasonable" hopes. Closing with one of the book's few statistics—"From 1890 to 1920, more than 2,000,000 of us left the land"—Wright sets the migrants' sharpest contact with "the brutal logic of jobs," the Northern "world

of *things*," and "the beginning of living on a new and terrifying plane of consciousness " (98, 99), specifically during World War I.

Though the narrative is set primarily in the past, the book's photographs were contemporary. Wright visited Washington early in 1941 to view extant FSA holdings, which covered most aspects of Southern black agricultural life and labor.



Dorothea Lange, *The Cotton Sharecropper's Unit is One Mule and the Land He Can Cultivate With a One-Horse Plow*. Greene County, Georgia, 1937. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF34-017965-C].



Russell Lee, *Family on Relief*, Chicago, Ill. 1941. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF34-038677-D].

At some point an extensive FSA coverage of the Chicago Black Belt was decided on; images from this work would accompany Wright's two final chapters on urban life. This photography was done by Russell Lee and by Roskam, who acted as both photographer and project coordinator, during the first two weeks of April, 1941. Working in the neighborhoods of cramped and deteriorating "kitchenette" apartments which were home to migrants, the photographers presented a chilling account of Northern urban life, where, Wright writes, the death rate exceeded the birth rate, so that "if it were not for the trains and autos bringing us daily into the city from the plantations, we black folks who dwell in northern cities would die out entirely over the course of a few years" (107). Nevertheless, the pictures in-

tended to show "the black belt [as] an environment,"¹ including both the miseries of kitchenette life—"our death sentence without a trial" (106)—and the home life and community networks that South Side residents struggled to create.

In his brief concluding chapter "Men in the Making," Wright assigns his collective voice to "the children of the black sharecroppers, the first-born of the city tenements" (142), denoting not "African Americans as they were, but as they were becoming," as Kenneth Warren writes (397). For the journey North over "the common road of hope" made by "thousands of poor migrant whites" (Wright, *12 Million* 100) as well as for blacks, is the process necessary to bring black Americans into "the sphere of conscious history" (147). Ending on a note of hope and affirmation, he places blacks "with the new tide," maintaining that "Hundreds of thousands of us are moving into the sphere of conscious history" (146-147).

Of some 1500 images initially printed from the work, 420 now remain at the Library of Congress.² Though described officially as supplementing the FSA file by showing Chicago as a major "terminus of . . . migration,"³ the work was actually specifically intended "for the book Ed is doing with Richard Wright" as FSA administrator Clara Dean Wakeham wrote to staff photographer Jack Delano. Her letter warned him as well that this information was "off the record . . . and not to be talked about"—presumably because FSA photographs were intended to serve as neutral, official records rather than as material for projects specified in advance (and Wright's Communist Party ties may also have seemed problematic).⁴ Also not talked about in FSA correspondence and records is the fact that Wright

¹ See Roskam, general caption, "The Black Belt—An Environment."

² Cayton, *Pittsburgh Courier* column, n.d., *Wright Papers*. Cayton writes: "I had an opportunity of looking over the entire 1500 shots which were taken in Chicago alone. When I had finished, my reply to Roskam was that I, who had helped to pick out the scenes and had worked with him in Chicago, could not believe what I had seen." Natanson numbers the FSA Chicago series at 420 images (147); he discusses the coverage and the book at length (142-177, and 244-256).

³ Russell Lee to Roy E. Stryker, April, 1941, *Stryker Papers*, microfilm reel NDA 31.

⁴ Clara Dean Wakeham to Jack Delano, 3 Apr. 1941, *Stryker Papers*.

was in Chicago with the photographers, providing guidance and advice during the shoot, so that, Rosskam noted in a later interview, "I don't know if many white men had the opportunity to see it the way we saw it." Wright had an abiding interest in photography and was an accomplished amateur; the first edition of *12 Million* includes one photograph by him and European editions of some of his later books carried numerous Wright photographs. Not only did "Dick Wright . . . [know] everybody in the Negro world of Chicago," so that the photographers "did everything from the undertaker to the gangster" as Rosskam said, but he was able as well to draw on the resources of his friend sociologist Horace Cayton, director of the Good Shepard Community Center, who arranged many locations and contacts (Wright later contributed the preface to Cayton and St. Clair Drake's 1945 Chicago study *Black Metropolis*; Doud 45). The omission from official records of both Wright's and Cayton's involvement in the Chicago South Side coverage has encouraged scholarly oversight of what may be the first extensive photographic documentation of urban African American life over which blacks themselves had significant control.

As Paul Gilroy points out, Wright's work occupied, simultaneously, a "relationship with the Book-of-the-Month Club," whose main selection of *Native Son* marked "an entirely new phenomenon for a black writer approaching the cultural mainstream of American society," and "a central place in the radical political culture of the international communist movement" (147). *12 Million* conjoined the work of U.S. government employees with that of an acknowledged Communist Party member; upon publication the book was featured in Book-of-the-Month Club literature, offered free with a subscription to the Communist Party magazine *New Masses*, respectfully reviewed in mainstream periodicals, and investigated for seditious statements by the FBI (Gayle 139). As these circumstances emphasize, the occasion of its composition and publication was not only a collaboration among individuals but also a confluence of disparate discourses and practices. To illuminate this multiply constructed event we might begin by locating Wright's text as an early, central, and positive articulation of the African American migration narrative, and by considering its

position in Wright's literary development and his political trajectory toward a transnational, pan-African vision of black identity and "black power;" also to be investigated are the collaborative Chicago coverage, and the significance of photography generally to Wright's conception and expression of his subject.⁵

Though *12 Million* was described in at least one review as probably "a publisher's fill-in" between works of greater significance, the book has endured. Seen by some as Wright's "only admiring portrait of blacks," *12 Million* became an "instant Bible" for photographer Gordon Parks, and Langston Hughes taught it in creative writing courses (Rampersad 128; Parks 190, 199). Reprinted in 1988, it is the subject of current discussion by critics including Houston Baker, Paul Gilroy, and Farah Griffin, and artist Carrie Mae Weems pays explicit homage to *12 Million* in her recent work.⁶

Wright could hardly have stated more explicitly the centrality he assigned to the dynamics of migration and the consciousness it produced. He wrote in "Blueprint for Negro Writing": "Reduced to its simplest and most general terms, theme for Negro writers will rise from understanding the meaning of their being transplanted from a "savage" to a "civilized" culture in all of its social, political, economic, and emotional implications" (104). Wright's own statements about *12 Million*, as well as early notes and of course the published text itself, make clear how directly he shaped the book to fulfill this prescription. It was from the sociological studies of migration dynamics and adjustment to urban life then current at the University of Chicago, Wright has written, that he "drew the meanings" for his "documentary book" *12 Million Black Voices* as well as for his novel *Native Son* (Cayton xviii). Concepts he found in the work of Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth aided him to articulate—and encouraged

⁵ In a longer essay, I will consider the reception of this work, including a third text, the April 1942 appearance in *Coronet* of an excerpt from *12 Million* which includes, besides Wright's condensed running text from the book, so-called "original verse" captions keyed to each picture, in (bizarrely) "the colorful folk style of Paul Laurence Dunbar's 'Lyrics of Lowly Life,'" according to Wright's biographer Michel Fabre (235).

⁶ See Baker, Gilroy and Griffin.

him to valorize—the migrants' experiences. Specially important among these was the positive value which Park assigned to urbanism and to the marginalization occasioned by its inevitable ethnic heterogeneity. The urban "marginal man," wrote Park, in the very isolation and torment of "spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness, and *mal-aise*," is the harbinger of the most progressive and enlightened phases of "civilization": "It is in the mind of the marginal man—where the changes and fusion of culture are going on—that we can best study the processes of civilization and progress" (356).⁷ Such concepts, bolstering Wright's Marxist analysis, enabled his emphasis on both the transnationalism of Afro-U.S. historical consciousness and the primacy of U.S. national narrative; they grounded his argument that

brutal, bloody, crowded with suffering and abrupt transitions, the lives of us black folk represent the most magical and meaningful picture of human experience in the Western world. Hurlled from our native African homes into the very center of the most complex and highly industrialized civilization the world has ever known, we stand today with a consciousness and memory such as few people possess. (146)

But he contends as well that blacks and whites are bound by "deeper" ties than those that separate us, and argues too that "black . . . history and . . . present being are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America" Suggesting that "what we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America *is*," and that "*we are you*," Wright insists that

if America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the *living* past living in the present, for our memories go back, through our black folk of today, through the recollections of our black parents, and through the tales of slavery told by our black grandparents, to the time when none of us, black or white, lived in this fertile land. (146)

Some of Wright's most lyrical—and thematically central—passages, as well as the inclusion of photography, thus appear as efforts to rework specific sociological concepts in a vernacular register. (Though the appeal of the term "folk," rather than "people," which had been Wright's designation for the African American collectivity in early drafts, may have lain in its

⁷ See Cappetti, for discussion of Wright's and other authors' uses of Chicago sociology.

more "neutral" and scientific connotations.) There was, however, as literary historian John Reilly points out, an additional theoretical underpinning—and formal paradigm—for *12 Million*; it was the political concept of nationalism, as Wright encountered it in Marxist theory and buttressed it with sociological thesis. Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, which Wright credited with moving him to "the first total emotional commitment of my life," explicated the nation in Leninist theory as an "historically constituted, stable community . . . , formed on the basis of [possessing] a common language, . . . territory, . . . economic life . . . , and . . . psychological make-up," all "manifested in common specific features of national culture"—with or without an achieved national state (Reilly 116, 117). In 1928 the Communist Party proclaimed African Americans an oppressed nation with a right to self-determination, and Wright learned of the Bolsheviks' support for regional autonomy for national minorities within the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Intellectuals, Wright concluded, had encouraged the preservation of rural folk cultures and fostered literacy and self-consciousness, "given these tongueless people a language, newspapers, institutions," as a step toward "unity on a national scale." "How different this was from the way in which Negroes were sneered at in America," he wrote, and planned in his work to show "the kinship between the sufferings of the Negro and the sufferings of other people" (*Hunger* 82).⁸ In *Blueprint*, Wright had outlined the role of the writer in such a nationalist cultural renaissance, arguing that "the Negro writer must realize within the area of his own personal experience those impulses which, when prefigured in terms of broad social movements, constitute the stuff of nationalism." In *12 Million*, claims Reilly, Wright's "amalgamation of his

⁸ Reilly asserts that it was actually in sociology, again the writings of Robert Park, that Wright found a needed elaboration of the status of national minorities in specifically modern society. Park, whose approach to sociology was informed by wide-ranging experience and who had worked closely with Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, saw that in "modern civilization, depressed social groups tend to assume the form of nationalities," that "nationalist movements are analogous," and that "these movements have invariably had the general character of a renaissance, a nationalist or racial rebirth" (117).

migrant's experience and his tutelage in science" form a "perfect metaphor" that "gives Black national consciousness expression" (117).⁹

Reilly's insightful reading further suggests that Wright's text (he makes no mention of the book's photographs or of Edwin Rosskam) not only refers to but also embodies central aspects of the national culture it means to represent. Noting features that mark the text's relation to oral narrative, Reilly claims that Wright has "taken on" the style of a "vernacular orator" to offer a "simulated sermon," a performed narration whose form, rhetoric, and theme were familiar to its intended black audience, even as they conveyed the "vanguard writer's" philosophy of secular history and conception of nationalism. "Tak[ing] as the text to preach the people themselves," the orating voice tells "how they were ripped from the civilization of Africa, brutalized on the middle passage, and thrown amidst savagery in slavery."¹⁰ At the same time, Wright "compromises" the "authority" that might accrue to such a speaker by using the collective pronoun "we" throughout

⁹ Reilly demarcates the writer's relation to culture, writing that while "the institutional life developed in the shadow of slavery and the folkways that constitute realization of the meaning in suffering represent the culture that denominates the Black nation," it is "self-conscious literature speaking to and for a Black audience" that can "animate the transformation of Afro-Americans into a modern citizenry" (117).

¹⁰ Reilly notes the text's repetition of key terms and phrases, its frequent allegory and metaphor even as myriad facts are put forth, its frequent asides, as to a listening audience: "How did this paradoxical amalgam of love and cruelty come to be? Well, men are many and each has his work to do" (24). Crucially, "Lords of the Land" and "Bosses of the Buildings" personify capitalist evil; the racializing term "Negro" is a "psychological island" with "rocky boundaries" (30), and, personified in fifteen paragraphs, "the kitchenette" which "reaches out with fingers full of golden bribes to the officials of the city" wreaks havoc: it is "author of the glad tidings that new suckers are in town, ready to be cheated," is "our prison, our death sentence without a trial," and, finally, "the funnel through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on the city pavements, at a profit" (109-11). But differently from the "actual" sermon presented in the center of the book, Wright's secular narrative must conclude not with the "end of Time and of Death," but with entry into "the sphere of conscious history" (147), and so there is throughout "a significant ambivalence," Reilly notes, toward Euro-American culture, as the bearer both of slavery's brutality and of "a new world culture . . . a higher human consciousness" (12). Thus, Reilly argues, Wright's secular text reinscribes the "'fortunate fall'" familiar in sacred oratory as a "fortunate contradiction" leading to "historical, rather than divine, salvation" (117).

the book and by using primarily the present tense. "[T]he privileged act of narrating and testifying is shared among 12 million subjects"; and tongueless people are given voice, for "the audience is already participating as it hears/reads its story." Authority is thus located in the experience of the audience itself; its consenting reception of narration affirms its own authority and "acknowledg[es] the continuous significance of Afro-American history in its consciousness." The "final lesson of the national sermon," proclaims Reilly, is that African Americans can become "their own historical subject," and that, undertaking such a self-creation, they will transcend nationalism to become "the truly representative modern people" (118).

Calling *12 Million* "a synthesis of inherited cultural forms, concepts of social evolution, and innovative techniques by which 'sincere art and honest science' would enrich each other," Reilly implies the photographic intertext to which he never explicitly refers. Wright himself acknowledged that the book's crucial impetus came from Roskam's suggestion that he "write the text for a group of [FSA] pictures." Perusing the FSA files—"one of the most remarkable collections of photographs in existence," its "comprehensive picture of our country" offering "quite an education," as he noted—Wright explained to an interviewer that he and Roskam "looked at thousands" to select the eighty-six used in the book (Kinnamon/Fabre 43, 44). As Gilroy points out, in later writing Wright consistently referred to his own dislocated perspective as "double vision," rather than using W.E.B. DuBois's term "double consciousness," and it is interesting that his early (perhaps first) metaphoric articulation of black transnationalism as a decentering mirror for "American" eyes occurs as photographic intertext (161).

German-born Roskam, a trained artist with extensive journalistic experience, had come to the FSA to do layout, photo-editing and exhibition design in 1938, bringing extensive publishing contacts useful to the agency. By 1940, he had edited several photo-text books for Alliance Press's "Face of America" series, including *Washington Nerve Center*, *San Francisco*, and *As Long as Grass Shall Grow* (on Native Americans). During his FSA stint he produced *Home Town*, with FSA pictures and text

by Sherwood Anderson, and had actually left the agency by the time he did *12 Million*. Nevertheless, his ties remained close, so that he could not only draw freely on the (ultimately) 80,000-image file, but also convince FSA photography project director Roy Stryker to undertake the additional 1941 two-week Chicago coverage. February correspondence between Wright and Cayton indicates that both were involved early on in its planning, Cayton writing to ask Wright for "an outline of the fields of social life" which the pictures would cover.¹¹ An intermediate draft of Wright's acknowledgments thanks Cayton for "advice and guidance in the taking of photographs which made sections of this book possible."¹² Any reference to photographs on Wright's part had of course to be removed before publication, as was, too, his acknowledgment of Joseph Stalin for his *Marxism, Nationalism and Colonialism*.

Wright and Rosskam remained in touch throughout their compositional process, Rosskam writing of plans to show Wright "the pictures and dummy," insisting that Wright would be surprised "how the pictures will help you" in composing a final draft of the urban chapters. Rosskam felt that these chapters "say the most important things in the whole book,"¹³ emphasizing in a later interview his "fondness" for the text as a whole (Doud 45). Though some recent scholarship has claimed that Wright composed his text without "knowing what images [it] would accompany," such is clearly not the case (Stott 232).

Besides these historical data, there are, I contend, eloquent traces in each formal feature of the book that underscore the textual message as both men understood and agreed on it. Though published by Viking Press rather than Alliance, which had done Rosskam's earlier books, *12 Million* features Rosskam's signature style of typography, layout, and captioning. Photographs are large, generally half-page to full page size, and every two or three pages a double page spread or multiple page sequence of photographs interrupts the text. Images sometimes appear without captions but

¹¹ Cayton to Wright, 5 Feb. 1941, *Wright Papers*, Box 95, Folder 1254.

¹² *Wright Papers*, Box 62, Folder 730.

¹³ Rosskam to Wright, n.d., *Wright Papers*, Box 105, Folder 1585.

more often bear brief captions in boldface which, repeating phrases from the text, serve, like other textual repetitions, as emphasis rather than addition.

Moreover, the pictures themselves seem remarkably coherent in style and even in impact, so that, historian George Puckett has noted, they seem to have been carefully selected and arranged to "maximize their impact as *illustrations*" (63, my italics) rather than as independent visual statements. They are often closely cropped or tightly framed so that they exclude sky, horizon, or geographic markers that might stand as signs of a particular cultural landscape. Many are individual or group portraits, in generally square or horizontal formats, usually shot head on, without monumentalizing angles or other evident formal manipulation. Particularly evident in all Rosskam's layouts is a consistent full page bleed: photographs are



The streets claim our children

139

Russell Lee. *Street Scene Under the Elevated, Chicago, Ill.* From: Wright, *12 Million* 139. © 1941 by Richard Wright, photograph copyright © by Russell Lee. Appears by permission of the Publisher Thunder's Mouth Press.

extended flush to one or more edges of the page, rather than set off with a white border. In the many interiors or cityscapes of walled in spaces, backgrounds read as gray or gray-black tones, and the images in general are printed quite dark. Since Rosskam used this full-bleed layout in all his books, I cannot argue that it has specific significance here; nevertheless, the indefinite extension, rather than specific containment, of darkness implicit in the layout seems consonant with Wright's textual message, implying the dialectics of placelessness and boundedness posited in the text. Such a layout and printing

mode, invoking in its arty informality the medium's expressive and symbolic possibilities—its construction rather than transparency—resist readings that take the photographic content here as objectified, actual "evidence," rather than as polysemous signifier.

As many examples attest, the use of even the most straightforwardly "documentary" photographs to counter the "inscribed narrative" (Trachtenberg 63) of culturally engrained stereotypes is problematic, even when images were made specifically to show not only wretched conditions but also cultural complexities. Such ideological impotence reminds us that all photographs are, like other images, polysemous constructions rather than transparent windows; "they imply," writes Roland Barthes, "underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others." The linguistic message associated with a photograph, Barthes continues, serves as "anchorage" that fixes the floating chain; it "remote-controls [the reader] toward a meaning chosen in advance." (Barthes 39, 40). Wright alludes to the power of this vast stock of available "meanings" in *Native Son*, by offering a merciless pastiche of court reporters' newspaper clichés purporting to describe Bigger (and which Wright has Bigger read about himself as he sits in jail). These include the "lower jaw [that] protrudes obnoxiously [like] . . . a jungle beast," the arms dangling "to his knees," and "strange sullen . . . stare" that depict a beast "like an earlier missing link in the human species," who lacks "the charm of the average, harmless, genial, grinning southern darky so beloved by the American people" (260).

As I have argued elsewhere, FSA documentary style in general evoked "humanitarian" responses even as it signaled modernity and "progress;" the excision of topical and social reality in favor of categorizing abstraction was a way to give "symbolic form to communications technology itself, [to image] an American instrumentalism that eased accommodation to perpetual change and gave grounds for popular approval of engineered 'progress'" (Stange 105, 130-31). To consider this argument in relation to both the narrative of migration and transformation that propels *12 Million* and to the history and power of racial stereotype opens it to new questions. We

might begin by asking how photographic style as well as content testifies to African Americans' work in the "transformation of the modernist metropolis," as Michael Denning writes (231), to their construction of the "most up-to-date . . . black identities," as Kenneth Warren writes (398), and to their position as, in John Reilly's words, "the truly representative modern people" (118).

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Strangers in Disguise: Role Play beyond Identity Politics in Anarchic Film Comedy

. . . a city is a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet. For this definition to hold true, the settlement has to have a large, heterogeneous population; the population has to be packed together rather densely; market exchanges among the population must make this dense, diverse mass interact. In this milieu of strangers whose lives touch there is a problem of audience akin to the problem of audience an actor faces in the theatre. (Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*)

Monkey Business: The Lives and Legends of the Marx Brothers—a biography which draws its title from one of their famous early sound films—tells us about Harpo's memories

of being the only Jewish kid in a classroom of Irish boys, run by one Miss Flatto, who was inexplicably out of the room whenever the Irish kids chose to throw him out of the window . . . in those days, you sensed you were a Jew or an Italian or Irish based upon who tried to beat the crap out of you going home. (Louvish 30)

Indeed, reading this family saga makes us appreciate the roots of ethnic comedy, growing out of experiences in the immigrant neighbourhoods of New York City, where at the turn of the century about 40% of all inhabitants were foreign born. Between 1880 and 1920, over one million immigrants arrived and settled in New York City, primarily Eastern European Jews and Italians (Foner 356). Minnie Marx, mother and manager to Leo, Adolph, Julius, Milton, Herbert (alias Chico, Harpo, Groucho, Gummo, Zeppo), was herself an off-spring of a family of travelling performers. She had married Samuel 'Frenchy' Marx, a Jewish immigrant from Alsace. The harp, which would later become a centerpiece

of Harpo's stage and screen acts, had already been played by 'Omie' Fanny when she was touring Northern Germany with her husband Levy 'Lafe' Schönberg, a ventriloquist and magician, before their arrival in New York in 1879. The Marx family had escaped the slums of the Lower Eastside, and moved up-town, but nonetheless housing conditions were cramped and finding work was not always easy.

In this capital of immigrants, kids learnt to be street smart from an early age, and observant about accents and other perceived ethnic markers—good training in seeing oneself as well as others in an ironic light. This was also reflected on the variety stage where Dutch (equivalent to German) acts or Hebrew acts and ethnic yodelling were standard elements of the program, accompanied by dubious Darwinian spectacles with titles like "Old Zip, the missing link between ape and human" (Louvish 25). The ethnic acts often revolved around misunderstandings and incompetence which were common experiences to immigrants in the audience who had to learn a new language and new routines of behaviour in an alien environment. Groucho started his career on one of these variety stages as a boy tenor and "impersonator of the Yiddischer" (48), but reviews of later acts suggest that the Marx Brothers were perhaps primarily perceived as German. Becoming a performer was often the only way out of the ghetto and to move up in society. The Brothers and others adopted ethnic joking and role-play as survival strategies of speaking back and counteracting hostility and aggression in a competitive and not always welcoming environment.

Remembering the Marx Brothers and their abilities in anarchic performance seems a good starting point to reflect more generally on the potentials of humor and role-play in "combatting racism," especially in our contemporary world where national broadcasting media or film funding schemes can no longer avoid the question of how to represent and address increasingly multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural audiences. As Mary Gillespie has recently argued, the British Asian comedy series *Goodness Gracious Me*, written and performed by Meera Syal, among others, and shown on BBC 2, "has done more to celebrate multilingualism and

cultural diversity in the mainstream of British TV than a thousand earnest documentaries" (Gillespie n. pag.).

Exile and comedy, diaspora and humor appear to be contradictions in terms. How could uprooting, loss of home and displacement in a strange land be anything but unsettling, traumatic and tragic?—In the prevalent rhetoric about diaspora cultures and representations of minorities in the media, metaphors of space and place carry heavy emotional, often nostalgic investments which need to be carefully scrutinized. Current discourses about migrant communities in Europe are often haunted by residual notions of identity based on supposedly pure and authentic cultures of origin. Zygmunt Bauman, in his essay on "The Making and Unmaking of Strangers," links the new need for strangers to the experience of post-modern fragmentation:

The essential differences between the socially produced modality of modern and postmodern strangers . . . is that while modern strangers were earmarked for annihilation, and served as borderlines for the advancing boundary of the order-under-construction, the postmodern ones are—by joyful or grudging, but common consent—here to stay. To paraphrase Voltaire's comment on God: if they did not exist, they would have to be invented. . . . And they are, indeed, invented, zealously and with gusto—patched together out of salient or minute and unobtrusive distinction marks. They are useful precisely in their capacity as strangers: their strangerhood is to be protected and lovingly preserved. (54)

In the language of 'identity politics' it is considered a human right to have 'one's own culture,' a claim which draws on the problematic assumption of homogenous, clearly delineable cultural traditions and identities. The focus on cultural difference which appears to be liberating, in practice often consolidates the construction of binary oppositions between 'foreign' and 'indigenous,' 'other' and 'self.' This separatist thinking tends to generate a whining or patronizing rhetoric of being lost 'between two cultures' which highlights negative effects of uprooting and dislocation, rather than positive experiences of encounter and adventure.

Possibilities of transgressing these symbolic regimes of victimization and marginalization might be opened up through strategies of humor and irony, carnival and anarchy, distancing and reversal, masquerade and

mutual mimicry, delusion and role-play, in short monkey business. Comic moments in the transnational and transethnic imagination can suggest liberating rhetorical positions beyond territorially grounded notions of identity and belonging and destabilize dominant practices of inclusion and exclusion. Obviously, I do not mean to suggest that violent, often fatal conflicts resulting from ethnic segregation could be resolved if everybody just had a good laugh together. Moreover, it has to be said that ethnic role-play in comedy frequently draws on crude stereotyping which amounts to little more than blatant racism and where "the power of laughter" is kept "in the hands of the powerful" (Medhurst, 16). However, I do believe that humor can be instrumental in releasing tensions and breaking up encrusted fixations in the way we perceive ourselves and others, that it can have the power to challenge and ridicule power.

Following Aristotle, the thinkers of the Renaissance and early modern period described laughter as derisive, as an expression of scorn and superiority. The risible as the subject matter of comedy was generally associated with the shameful, the ugly and the base which generated contempt. Hypocrisy and vaingloriousness, in particular, were vices open to derision. The rhetoricians were interested in defining figures and tropes of speech which would move the emotions of an audience, prompt scornful laughter and thus arouse hostile feelings against their dialectical enemies. In the course of the 'civilising process,' as rules of politeness were implemented, philosophers began to argue for controlling laughter by restraint and respect.¹ A different strand of thought, however, has focused on the anarchic powers of folk humor. In this context, laughter was described as a joyful and cathartic release of tensions, as an attack on control with subversive effects on dominant social hierarchies. In his famous analysis of the work of François Rabelais and the culture of markets, festivals and carnival in the Middle Ages, Mikhail Bakhtin initiated an appreciative outlook on folk humor. Carnivalist laughter in this sense may momentarily catalyse fantasies of liberation and utopian visions of an alter-

¹ Cf. Skinner.

native social order. Generally, it is important to remember that revolution and control, anarchy and containment, inclusion and exclusion are always closely interrelated in comedy. There can be no transgression without the knowledge about the norm. The terms of purity and pollution which anthropologist Mary Douglas uses in relation to joke cognition provide a useful angle in the analysis of the dynamics of comedy and community. While rituals create unity in experience and assert hierarchy and order, she describes jokes as "anti-rites" which denigrate, devalue and destroy hierarchy and order and can unsettle closed communities. It is certainly no coincidence that Freud's analysis of joking draws heavily on examples of Jewish humor and highlights the tripartite structure of address in jokes. There is always the joker, the listener and the target or butt of the joke (Neale/Krutnik 72).² A fundamental question in any analysis of comedy will therefore have to be: Who is the butt of the joke? Who is laughing at whom and why?

In the following, these questions will be pursued in relation to two examples.³ My first example of anarchic ethnic comedy will be drawn from a field which has been well researched and documented in film studies, from Jewish American comedy in the period of early sound cinema where we shall once again encounter the Marx Brothers. My second example will be drawn from more unfamiliar ground and might come as a surprise as it is from contemporary Germany—a country not exactly famous for its humor these days. But we shall see how current discourses of national territory, belonging, identity, citizenship and multiculturalism are attacked through anarchy in a comedy by Hussi Kutlucan, a Turkish German actor/director from Berlin.

The focus on performers is motivated by research conducted within the larger framework of the "Transnational Communities Research Programme" funded by the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council

² Cf. Freud.

³ This paper grows out of a larger project on "Comedy and Community."

of Britain.⁴ The program includes about twenty projects, mainly in the social sciences, covering a broad spectrum of contemporary transnational practices, ranging from seafarers on international trade ships, domestic servants from the Philippines and refugees from Bosnia to expatriate businessmen in Singapore. The overall approach might be described as a kind of 'transnationalism from below,' as opposed to 'top down' approaches to processes of globalisation which focus on the political economy of transnational corporations. People—family members or business associates—who maybe scattered over several continents, are using transport and communications technologies with increased regularity, speed, intensity and efficiency, thereby establishing transnational links while, at the same time, positioning themselves within national frameworks. By taking situated 'actors' who are mobile agents in transnational networks as a starting point, the aim is the foreground questions of agency while keeping a firm grasp on structural constraints.⁵ In this essay, 'actors' are taken quite literally as performers in film comedies, and their strategies of intervention through anarchy and role-play are considered in historical perspective. As we shall see, their mobility can be physical as well as imaginary. The focus on agency does not, however, imply the desire to "return to an unmediated and transparent notion of the subject or identity as the centered author of social practice" (Hall 2). Because

actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from,' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (4)

⁴ See the Council Website at: <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>.

⁵ See Gillespie.

II

Chandler [the art expert]: All right boys, I confess, I was Ivan Pilsudski [the fish-peddler from Czechoslovakia].

Chico: How did you get to be Roscoe W. Chandler?

Chandler: Say, how did you get to be an Italian?

Chico: Never mind, whose confession is this?

(The Marx Brothers, *Animal Crackers*)

Following Charles Musser, we can read early American film comedy as a challenge to adopt "a more theoretically adventurous approach" to questions of ethnicity and class in cinema and to move "from looking at individual groups with the goal of affirming their identities ('images of studies) to a more ironic look at the larger question of ethnic identity itself" (41). This approach seems to suggest a way out of the restrictions of identity politics into the complicated dynamics of inter-ethnic exchange. While on the one hand, encounters with unfamiliar looking strangers provoke feelings of insecurity, fear, anxiety, repulsion and aggression, on the other hand, the "other" also evokes curiosity, fascination, attraction, desire, and play. Ethnic role-play, imitation and impersonation were familiar to audiences from the vaudeville stage, but these routines were revitalised and even more widely disseminated through early sound cinema.⁶

At the advent of sound, the Marx Brothers had reached the height of their virtuosity in "anarchistic comedy"—a term introduced by Jenkins to describe the tendency towards disorder and heterogeneity in early sound films on the level of both form and content, a term also designed to foreground "the active and central role of the clowns as bringers of anarchy" (22-23). *Monkey Business* (1931) was their first Hollywood venture after the New York produced films *The Cocoanuts* (1929) and *Animal Crackers* (1930), both based on Broadway shows. In *Monkey Business*, Zeppo, Groucho, Harpo and Chico cross the Atlantic as stow-aways on a luxury ocean liner, causing havoc on the ship, ruthlessly

⁶ See Musser, Jenkins, Rogin and Winnokur.

mimicking, ridiculing and insulting the Captain, officers and fellow passengers. Having arrived in New York, they cannot disembark without a passport. Zeppo turns up with a stolen passport which happens to belong to (an off-screen) Maurice Chevalier, hence they decide to impersonate the world famous French performer who had arrived in Hollywood in 1929 and was enjoying great popularity with American audiences at the time as the sophisticated star of romantic comedies such as Ernst Lubitsch's *The Love Parade* (1929) and *The Merry Widow* (1934) until he returned to Europe in 1935. The appropriation and impersonation of Maurice Chevalier's identity is a play on the recurring image of acquiring a new name and a new self upon arrival at Ellis Island and starting a new life. But it is not a straightforward Americanization of immigrants which is enacted in this scene. The aspiring performers can only assume the identity of a foreigner, but they choose to impersonate a cosmopolitan who is not an immigrant, who can travel freely because of his transcontinental reputation and who is admired by the Americans.

The scene depicts a crisis of identification and border trouble. All travellers are disciplined by the officials: "Passports ready. Stay in line." Meanwhile, Groucho, Harpo and Chico cause confusion by pushing to the front. Zeppo, as usual, is cast in the role of the 'straight man,' the love interest, who serves as one of the butts to the unruly attacks of the others. He performs according to standard, acts like an assimilated immigrant and distances himself from the noisy lot. He attempts the most serious impersonation of Maurice Chevalier, and sings with romantic tremolo, but nevertheless, does not succeed in convincing the officials of his assumed identity, and is sent to the back. The others present their own versions of the same song and thus perform different types of immigrants: Chico with his Tyrolean hat and accent comes as the Italian who sings a burlesque parody of the supposed Chevalier song in broken English. The song itself is about acquiring another's voice: "When the nightingale could sing like you, they'd sing much sweeter than they do . . ." More than anything else, this seems to be a self-reflexive reference to an early stage act of the Marx Brothers as *The Four Nightingales*.

Groucho with his big moustache, cigar and characteristic strident gait performs the streetwise, eccentric Jewish immigrant who has moved up from the Lower Eastside. His comic strategies are based on unexpected quick responses, taking words by their literal meaning, deliberate misunderstandings, and transgressions of social conventions. He always has a rude answer ready, throwing any remark right back into the other's face.

Officer: Say, this picture doesn't look like you.

Groucho: Well, it doesn't look like you either.

Officer: This man has no moustache!

Groucho: Well, the barber shop wasn't open this morning . . .

Where looks can be manipulated in the barber shop, there can be no relying on passport photos as a proof of identification. The scene privileges sound over image, quite in line with the new technology of talking pictures, which enabled the former vaudeville performers to finally see their verbal humor projected on screen. While identification by passport photo fails repeatedly, each of the Brothers' attempts to make up for the lacking resemblance by offering to sing a song. Voice competes with visual appearance as a means of identification. However, each of them performs the song according to their established and expected persona. Identity might be transgressed in role-play, but there is no way of escaping the role.

Finally, Harpo, the silent clown, struts in on the table. He is the most unruly and anarchic of them all, mimicking the officials, throwing all the documents up in the air, and wildly stamping anything which comes his way, including the bald head of a customs officer. He ridicules the whole idea of a passport by confusing it with a pasteboard and washboard. The audience expects him to remain mute, so his performance takes a surprising turn when he, too, bursts into song. His version of the song is the only one which, judging by the response in the listeners faces, could pass as authentic, but it is revealed to be live lipsync when the phonograph runs out of steam. The 'authentic' sound emanates from a record which, in the days of early sound film, could also be read as a tongue in cheek comment on the problems and potentials of synchronised sound pictures.

Significantly, the scene takes place on the border, negotiating between entering inside or remaining outside the nation. Through the act of impersonation, the performers transgress this liminal space. As they sing, they are already in America, appropriating the vaudeville stage and enacting their well established roles. They have to be pulled back "where they belong" by the officials in an attempt to police immigration and disruptive behaviour. But eventually they do manage to sneak off the ship and illegally infiltrate American society with their unruly anarchy, continuing to target figures of social status and authority, policies of regulation as well as conventions of the entertainment industry and its star system, working effectively as an ensemble.

Pricking Groucho's pretensions, his brothers are always there, in their proletarian cast-offs, to remind him, and us, of where we came from. If we may view Groucho as a rampaging Freudian super-ego, Chico is his immigrant reality-principle, and Harpo his unconscious id. They are, in this sense, different parts of the same personality. (Louvish 217)

Early sound comedies, drawing on the vaudeville tradition, tended to be dismissed by critics as failures in narrative integration, far inferior to silent comedies of Chaplin, Lloyd, Keaton and others. The pantomime skills of these silent clowns were not matched by the stand-up routines of talking comedians such as the Marx Brothers whose performance was considered inferior as their films did not fulfil criteria of classical cinema such as thematic significance, character consistency, narrative unity, causal logic, or psychological realism. Recently, however, critics have acknowledged the uneasy position of the "comedian comedy" within the classical cinema, and have pointed out that slapstick retained aspects of the earlier "cinema of attractions." The disruptive and disintegrative potential of gags, foreshadowing spectacle and performance over narrative consistency, is no longer explained as lack and failure, but rather as excess and anarchy, attacking social conventions and revealing the absurdity of everyday life.⁷

As Charles Musser has argued in relation to American film comedy of the 1930s,

⁷ See Jenkins.

the collisions of ethnic categories release psychic energy. Ethnicity is shown to be a constraint—and a construction—from which characters and audiences can be at least temporarily liberated. Role-playing, which was necessary and typically alienating, could become pleasurable, subversive, and affirming of self. (43)

The humor of the Marx Brothers or Eddie Cantor addressed a Broadway audience of urban sophistication. With the coming of sound their jokes were transmitted to provincial audiences out in the Mid-West for whom ethnic role-play was meaningless or even offensive. This transformation of the audience led to a gradual de-ethnization, concealing and erasing of Jewish characteristics and generally of ethnic role-play which is still dominant in *Monkey Business*.

III

Where does one stand as a German Turk within a German-Turkish dialogue? In the middle, perhaps? Or maybe even off to the side? If one presumes that identities exist in fixed, unbroken ways, then from the vantage point of a German Turk, the German-Turkish encounter becomes a nightmarish phantasm. The question—who and what is a German or a Turk—stands stubbornly and unmasked in the room. To make things easier, one leaves it untouched. But then, who is talking, and with whom? (Zafer Senocak, *Atlas of a Tropical Germany*)

The films of the Marx Brothers were not shown in their grandparents' country. They were blacklisted by the Nazi Propaganda Ministry along with other Jewish directors and actors. When Groucho went on a visit to his grandmother's hometown Dornum in 1958 and expected to be recognized in the local pub where he spoke Plattdeutsch with fluency and confidence, he found out that no one had ever heard of the Marx Brothers or seen their movies (Louvish 16-17). Their films would not achieve widespread popularity in Germany until the late 1960s, when they started to be broadcast on television (on WDR from 1967). Meanwhile, the Marx Brothers appear to have been popular characters in Turkish cinema of the

late 1930s and 1940s, where they were introduced as "Üç Ahbap Çavuşlar," dubbed with Armenian accents: Groucho as Arşak Palabıyıkyan, Chico as Torik and Harpo as Kıvırcık. No doubt, there are many ways of imagining oneself as Maurice Chevalier. The world-wide appeal of American popular culture can probably be explained by the predominance of role switching and interethnic joking, growing out of immigrant experiences.⁸ But these ethnic encounters and performances were also locally inflected and reconfigured around the world to make sense to specifically situated audiences.

Let us now time-travel to the old Marxs' homeland today, which was deprived of their madcap humor for such a long time, and discover a late brother in spirit with regard to anarchic comedy, a kind of reincarnation of Groucho with the Armenian voice of Arşak Palabıyıkyan, demonstrating his destabilising powers at the heart of the new Berlin Republic. Here, multiculturalism has become trendy these days. Berlin's radio station Radio Multi Kulti, for example, specialising in multicultural issues, foreign language programs for old and new immigrant communities, as well as world music for a cosmopolitan urban audience, started broadcasting in 1994 and has meanwhile grown to be a permanent institution, used as a model by other channels. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt which was founded in 1989, displays "world cultures" at the new center of Berlin while the park near by is populated by extended Turkish families, along with other Berliners, who are holding big picnics. In spring 2000, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt housed an exhibition titled *Heimat Kunst*, accompanied by various events and performances, all devoted to displaying creative work by 'strangers within,' namely writers, artists and filmmakers of 'foreign' origin, working in Germany, who are increasingly being celebrated as an enrichment of national culture by cultural institutions and dispatched as ambassadors to help Germany compete on a global market of consumable differences.⁹

⁸ Cf. Ostendorf.

⁹ See Steyerl.

The hype around ethnicity and hybridity in the realm of culture remains, however, rather disproportionate to political representation and participation. Like in other European countries, it goes along with a growing number of racist attacks as well as xenophobic and protectionist debates about immigration and the integrity of national culture. In March 2000, the government's proposal to give "green cards" to 25,000 South Asian computer scientists caused a heated debate which gave rise to infamous slogans such as "Kinder statt Inder" or "Ausbildung statt Einwanderung." Even the conservative party CDU (Christlich Demokratische Union) had to admit that Germany was now a country of immigration—a fact which had long been denied. If immigrants were an economic necessity policies regulating immigration had to be put in place. In a working paper on immigration, launched on November 7th, 2000, Friedrich Merz, the secretary general of the CDU, coined the rather nebulous and controversial concept of a German "Leitkultur," a "leading" mainstream culture which all immigrants were supposed to adapt to—a *bon mot* which triggered off yet another verbose round of national public debate. Around 9% (7.5 million) of Germany's resident population today is "foreign" (although not necessarily foreign born), i.e. does not hold a German passport, a figure considerably higher than in other European countries, due to a dated and never fully reformed citizenship law which has made it difficult for immigrants to become citizens. In Berlin, this figure is even higher. 13% of the city's total population (17.4% in former West-Berlin) are non-German. In the 40 years since the temporary labor recruitment agreement with Turkey was signed in 1961, in the same year as the Berlin Wall was built, immigrants from Turkey have grown to be the largest resident minority (over 2 million nationwide, around 140,000 in Berlin). Since the fall of the wall in 1989, the status of minorities in the reunified Germany and their place in the national narrative is being negotiated in new, even more riddled configurations.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Adelson.

Whether "Leitkultur" or not, immigrants have gradually established a noticeable presence in the media. The film series "Heimat Film" at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in May and June 2000, featured films such as *Dealer*, *Lola und Bilidikid*, *Aprilkinder* and *Kurz und Schmerzlos*, which had already been shown with critical acclaim as "New German Cinema—made by young Turks" at the Berlin Film Festival in February 1999 and in cinemas. Among these new productions the comedy *Ich Chef, Du Turnschuh / Me Boss, You Sneaker* (1998) deserves special attention as it marks a departure from the ghettoizing discourse of social problem films.¹¹ This film, directed by Hussi Kutlucan and produced by "Das kleine Fernsehspiel," a department devoted to foster new talent and innovative young *auteurs* at the public broadcasting channel ZDF, presents a refreshingly mocking take on the discourse of multiculturalist differentiation. Kutlucan was born in Turkey in 1962 and came to Berlin at the age of 9. After finishing school he played in a punk band "Soilent Green" (later known as "Die Ärzte") and completed training as an electrician. As an actor he has appeared in theater productions as well as feature films. His first film as a director was *Sommer in Mezra* (1991)—a roadmovie which starts in Berlin, but then departs for the grandmother's village in Eastern Turkey, where it develops into a hilariously futile treasure hunt on the ruins of a deserted Armenian village and ends, presumably heading for Germany, on a road through a barren Anatolian landscape, on an ancient motorcycle, a sheep on the back and a little girl in the passenger seat. In *Ich Chef, Du Turnschuh* once again Kutlucan directed himself in the lead role. With the director acting in front of the camera most of the time, the film develops as a wildly anarchic spectacle where the plot often gets lost in sidelines, but which is nonetheless notable for scenes foregrounding masquerade and ethnic role-play.

The title sequence of this "bitter-sweet survival comedy" shows a bus full of bored looking Indians in a bus on a bridge on the outskirts of Hamburg, underpinned by a soundtrack of South Indian pop music. As

¹¹ See Göktürk, *Migrantenkino* and *Turkish Women*.

they are approaching, their unruly behaviour such as smoking and spitting is being policed by German officials. Meanwhile parallel cuts show another group of asylum seekers who are expelled from "the ship"—floating barracks which have been built on the water. However, this is not an ocean liner on a transatlantic voyage, this is a docked up ship which is not going anywhere and where space is scarce. The old immigrants from Turkey are being deported to make room for the newcomers. The resulting chaos is captured appropriately by shaky handheld camera. In the general confusion, one Turk decides to masquerade as an Indian and wraps his scarf around his head as a turban. He decides to perform another ethnicity, choosing the one which is opportune at that moment, and posing with the group of Indians as they are addressed by the director of the camp who explains the rules of the premises.

But how did *Indian* become a privileged signifier? Interestingly, a similar transformation occurs in Osman Engin's *Der Kanaken-Gandhi* (1998), a satirical novel published the same year which also plays on the transformation and conflation of ethnic identities and features a Turk, a longstanding and well-established *Gastarbeiter*, who out of the blue one day receives an official letter addressing him as a rejected asylum seeker facing deportation and henceforth passes as Indian—despite all his efforts to prove the contrary. His enforced disguise is complemented by a turban-like bandage which he has to wear around his head after being attacked on a tram. One reason for the new appeal of *Indianness* might be the more noticeable presence and higher currency of this ethnicity on the transnational market of global diaspora cultures. As has been argued for racial cross-dressing in blackface minstrelsy of Jewish performers (such as Al Jolson), difference is articulated through the appropriation of another race or ethnicity with greater popular appeal.¹²

The director/actor Hussi Kutlucan chooses to assume the ethnic identity of an Armenian in *Ich Chef, Du Turnschuh*—a move which also points in the direction of passing as a member of an internationally known and

¹² See Rogin.

accepted diaspora culture. Rather than presenting himself as a Turk, Kutlucan chooses to align himself with the victims of the Turks, the Armenians. In his own explanation, the reason for this was to escape over-identification within the community and protect himself against possible reproaches of misrepresentation coming from other Turks. This is one of the many ways in which rhetorical strategies in the representation of migrants and minorities are cleverly enacted and fixed positions playfully undermined in this film. When Dudie's girlfriend, hoping for a better life, leaves him for a German, and he is in despair, one of the African refugees in the camp gives him the address of a friend in Berlin. When he arrives there he is welcomed by three men sharing a run down, overpriced flat, Kofi from Ghana, Arpad from Afghanistan and Saddam from Iran. The adventures of the asylum-seeker Dudie thus take us from the refugee-ship in Hamburg to the building site at the centre of Berlin where his three new friends are working. Potsdamer Platz, a desert where a whole new cityscape is mushrooming, the prospective home of the German government, is populated by illegal workers. Once again, territorial rights are being negotiated between old and new immigrants. As Enzensberger has described in relation to the alliance between strangers in a train compartment upon arrival of another stranger, an instant community forms to exclude any newcomers who might claim space (11-12). There is little solidarity lost between strangers, and the hierarchies are well established. In fact the old 'guest workers' on the site, framed in low angle shots, looking down on the asylum seekers, echo exactly what the secretary of the interior Otto Schily proclaimed around the time the film was produced: "Die Grenze der Belastbarkeit Deutschlands durch Zuwanderung ist überschritten" (*Die Welt*, 11/16/1998: 1). The established immigrants speak in broken German, but they nonetheless declare adamantly that the new comers should stay in their home countries as there is no room for them in Germany.

In the desert scape at the centre of Berlin, we see a muslim in close-up, praying "Allahu ekber," bowing and disappearing out of the frame, to clear the view on Dudie and his flat mates sitting on a sand hill against the sky. "Allahu ekber" is repeated, as he rises back into the frame, but his eyes are

caught by something happening to the left outside the frame which makes him pause. In a point of view shot, the camera moves to a man in work clothes (Vorarbeiter Hermann), peeing on a caterpillar. The prayer is resumed, a faint tone of resignation in his voice. Once more, the Muslim bows, but when he rises again the camera has moved behind him, and we now see him rising from behind, facing East, against the unfinished cupola of the Reichstag—his prayer cap almost forming a congruence with the new hat of the building. The performance of a muslim prayer against the backdrop of the Reichstag building offers a subversive perspective on the core of the reunified Republic. By unusual framing which deliberately does not follow the actor, and by ignoring the 180 degree rule as well as conventional editing practices the anarchic perspective is formally underscored. As the troubled history of the monumental Reichstag building is disappearing under the postmodern attachment erected by Sir Norman Foster, resignifying it as the seat of the parliament, it unexpectedly becomes an object of worship for citizens who had hitherto remained alien to the project of a German national culture. As the erection of mosques in German cities has been a conflictual matter, why not use the Reichstag as a substitute?

As he goes along, the immigrant Dudie learns how to perform his own cultural identity according to the expectations of his surroundings. When the landlord comes to collect the rent in the dismal flat which he shares with three others, Dudie emerges from a wardrobe with a newspaper in his hand, declaring that he has been praying in the dark, thus fulfilling an invented requirement of his religion to be solitary for worship. To silence the exasperated landlord he pays him an advance on the rent, but then cunningly retires back to the wardrobe, claiming that he has to resume his prayer. Neither the landlord nor the camera dares to follow him there—the closet remains an inaccessible black hole, open for all sorts of imaginations. Role-play is employed here to enact an ironic distance to the expectations about the director/actor's own religious identity. His performance implies discernible irony against the well-meaning discourse of

having one's own culture, and shows how this rhetoric is strategically adopted by disenfranchised minorities for their own purposes.

The film develops as a caricature of social-realist reportage in the style of Günther Walraff's *Ganz unten* (1985). When the illegal workers are refused their pay, they decide to claim a patch of land on the site as their own territory and celebrate their own little party against the backdrop of the Reichstag. From a highangle panoramic shot the camera gradually zooms in on the scene. The director/lead actor is joyfully hopping around in boxer shorts, waving a lettuce into the camera, a bottle of beer in the other hand, while one of his friends is waving a big chunk of raw meat, and another is tending the barbecue. There are pointed references in this scene to a long-standing controversy about prohibiting barbecues in the neighbouring Tiergarten, the park where immigrant families like to hold their picnics, arousing opposition from environmentalists who are concerned about detrimental effects on the lawn as well as conservatives who object to the unruly crowd on the doorstep of the president's residency. The rhythmical music emanating from a tape recorder, scornfully referred to as "bimbo music" by the boss, ironically refers to the multiculturalist agenda of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt which is also located close to this site and has established itself as a popular venue for 'world music.' Kofi, Arpad, Saddam and Dudie, the illegal immigrants from Ghana, Afghanistan, Iran and Armenia, dance in the sun and defend their little territory at the heart of the Berlin Republic against intrusions. This is a brief moment of utopian liberation where they hold some power against control—when the boss threatens to call the police, they tell him off, reminding him that they will tell the police that they have been working illegally without being paid. Mimicking the gesture of throat cutting with a knife, they perform with self-conscious mockery the role of the aggressive, violent immigrant male which has been widely popularised by the media.

The butt of these jokes tend to be German authority figures—the director of the refugee camp, the landlord, the boss, screaming hysterically at the top of their voice and displaying pathetic incompetence in coping with multicultural encounters. By ridiculing these figures, a bonding is estab-

lished with the enlightened members of the audience who can thereby confirm their distanced attitude to such bullying racism. However, the film does not remain confined in such simplistic polarities along the lines of ethnic identities. Conditions of exploitation and hierarchical behaviour also prevail in the Turkish restaurant where Dudie finds work. The son of the owner who considers himself the boss and bullies him around while the incredibly large wife of the boss makes passes at him but then accuses him of assault, causing a big turmoil and fight where Dudie defends himself with a whole chunky döner kebab on the stick. *Ich Chef, Du Turnschuh* cast a satirical eye at society where many people—both among natives and immigrants—have vainglorious aspirations of being the boss and finding some sneaker to tread down.

Dudie's attempt to escape the exploitative labour conditions and acquire a residence permit by marrying a voluptuous blonde whom he met in a disco ends in tragedy as the woman is stabbed accidentally in a fight by her jealous ex-husband, Vorarbeiter Hermann from the building site. Dudie is out on the street again without a job or a place to live. The dead woman's little son Leo had befriended Dudie and now insist on adopting him as his father. The little boy is 'naturalized' in a barber shop scene. Leo has his hair dyed brown and henceforth is called Hasan—a game which he seems to play with great pleasure. After this adjustment of appearance, the two ring the doorbell of Frau Dutschke, an elderly lady who they had spotted in the park, and claim that they were sent by the authorities to move in with her—a reenactment of the post-war scenario of "Einquartierung" in post-war Germany. The address is Oranienstrasse in Kreuzberg, an area populated largely by Turkish immigrants, interspersed with some remaining elderly Germans or students, where Hussi Kultlucan himself lives. Leo/Hasan supports their cause convincingly by speaking in broken German: "Guten Tag, Frau Dutschke! Das sein meine Vati." After initial surprise and resistance, the old lady comes to appreciate their company. She invites them to her living room to watch television with her, and they carry her shopping bags. Around the dinner table, enjoying a meal of fish which Dudie has prepared, the three form a utopian family beyond ethnicity and

age. The old lady expresses her happiness about not being alone any longer by turning on some music and proposing a dance. Dudie joins with a wink, saying somewhat ironically that "we all have to help each other, don't we?" while Leo/Hasan watches the couple in disbelief.

Happiness cannot last, however, as a jealous neighbour, the equally old Frau Zischke, calls the police to report the presence of the two illegal guests next door. The film began with an arrival, and it ends with a departure. Dudie is deported and put on a plane with the acquired, "Turkicized" German child. Despite all his efforts to reinstate the German identity of the child by pointing out his dyed hair and protesting his German mother, no one believes him, especially as the child himself adamantly insists that he is his son. The expulsion of this child, German 'flesh and blood,' by the officials is particularly ironic and ridicules distinctions between self and other, indigenous and foreign. The ending also echoes the publicity around the case of Mehmet, a 14-year old criminal who was deported from Munich to Turkey, on 14th November 1998. The music mix in the final sequence of the film, ranging from Turkish folk to Indian pop, underscores the rise of the plane against the sky, beyond the barbed wire, and signals a departure into transnational realms of global diasporas. It seems that the rhetoric of multiculturalism and diversity has become the norm which is being mocked in some scenes of this film. Humor disrupts, 'pollutes' the accepted convention of framing immigrants as victims on a subnational level. *Ich Chef, Du Turnschuh* is a spirited intervention into the culture of patronizing subsidy and an ironic take on current discourses about old immigrants, asylum seekers, integration, national unity and purity, passports and citizenship.

It is perhaps no surprise that among the new Turkish-German productions released in 1998 this film is the only one which did not find a commercial distributor. *Ich Chef, du Turnschuh* is not likely to reach a large audience, but it has been shown at a number of festivals (Filmfest Hamburg 1998, Filmfest Potsdam 1999, Mittelmeerfestival Köln, Saarbrücken, Deutsch-türkische Filmreihe in Oldenburg, "Türkisch und/oder deutsch" at Filmmuseum Frankfurt, "Turkish Cinema in Europe" at the National Film

Theatre in London 2000), and on television. On ZDF, the film was shown in 1998 in a series titled "Gefühlsecht. Junge deutsche Filme." And again in 2000, on October 3rd—Tag der deutschen Einheit, a nationally significant date—at prime time 20:15 as part of a series titled "Jung, deutsch und türkisch. Die zweite und dritten Einwanderergeneration." In the same year, the film received the Grimme Prize, awarded by the Institute of Journalism in Cologne. It was nominated for a European Television Award in Amsterdam recently, and will now be shown on the 3rd program of Dutch television. The film clearly marks a new venture which would not have been possible without funding from the television station. The hope remains that more broadcasting stations will follow in providing a forum for ironic and anarchic voices.

IV

The masked assemblies of the eighteenth century were in the deepest sense a kind of collective meditation on self and other, and an exploration of their mysterious dialectic. From basically simple violations of the sartorial code—the conventional symbolic connections between identity and the trappings of identity—masqueraders developed scenes of vertiginous existential recombination. New bodies were superimposed over old; anarchic, theatrical selves displaced supposedly essential ones; masks, or personae, obscured persons. . . . One became the other in an act of ecstatic impersonation. The true self remained elusive and inaccessible—illegible—within its fantastical encasements. (Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization*)

Transnational connections—real and imagined—are not an entirely new phenomenon. Despite the rhetoric of an Americanization in the melting pot, immigrants in turn-of-the-century New York also "established and sustained familial, economic, political, and cultural links to their home societies at the same time as they developed ties and connections in their new

land" (Foner 357). What is new, is the speed of transport and communication which enables a greater frequency of contacts and encounters in multilocal, multilingual lives. What is also new, is the greater visibility and acceptance of transnational ties, the celebration of multiculturalism and ethnic pride in street festivals and cultural events (Foner 368-69)—not only in New York, but also in other cities around the globe. In order to prevent identity from becoming a straight jacket rather than a colourful costume, it is important, however, to remember that ethnicities are by no means essential selves, that they syncretically draw upon invented traditions and strategically enact roles and disguises. Disentangling the conflation of public roles and personal selves, as described by Richard Sennett, is one of the major challenges of our time:

As the imbalance between public and intimate life has grown greater, people have become less expressive. With an emphasis on psychological authenticity, people become inartistic in daily life because they are unable to tap the fundamental creative strength of the actor, the ability to play with and invest feeling in external images of self. (37)

If self-conscious role play is mobilized against imposed and adopted stereotyping, the "global contact zone," where "world cinema" is consumed along with ethnic cuisine,¹³ might potentially develop into a space of mutual mimicry rather than onesided colonial mimicry, a space of transnational and transethnic encounters, enabling migrants to break out of claustrophobic scenarios of confinement, familiar from the cinema of exile or an "independent transnational cinema,"¹⁴ to speak back against benevolent social care, and to counteract patronizing pity with anarchy and irony. This might be an important step in the development of a "polycentric multiculturalism" where the world is not conceived "as a space where only Latinos would speak about Latinos, African-Americans about African-Americans and so forth, with every group a prisoner of its own reified difference," and where we can begin to understand "multifaceted polylogs," "multiple identifications" and "the complex relationalities of domi-

¹³ See Roberts.

¹⁴ See Naficy.

nation, subordination and collaboration" (Shohat/Stam 338-362). The focus on role-play and mimicry as rhetorical strategies aims to shift the terms of minority discourse away from a fixation with guilt which tends to generate "compassion fatigue" (344). The "touching tales of Turks, Germans, and Jews" and their encounters in imagined spaces of contemporary literary narratives by Feridun Zaimoğlu, Zafer Senocak and other authors, pose a challenge to configurations of cultural alterity and historical narrative, as Leslie Adelson has recently argued.¹⁵ By mapping out correspondences between immigrant strategies in New York at the beginning of the 20th century and in Berlin at the end of the century, and by making an—admittedly imaginary—link between the Marx Brothers and Hussi Kultucan, I intend to further complicate all too clear cut conceptions of ethnic and cultural identities in the Turkish-German-Jewish triologue by adding yet another "referential riddle" (Adelson 120).

Drawing on classics of ethnic role-play enriches our perspective on contemporary transnational, diasporic and multicultural comedies. We realize that strangers in disguise can be found at the heart of supposedly pure, monoglott cultures. The immigrant's arrival tends to be pictured as an entry into a culture of performance, where s/he has to learn new rules and adopt unfamiliar routines. In comedy scenarios, the immigrant can become a performer (rather than a pawn in somebody else's game). Once s/he has mastered the norms, there is also room for variation and deviation. The rules of play can be reconfigured. It is at this point that the ethnographic gaze can be turned around, that supposedly settled non-immigrants can be mocked and unsettled, and themselves be incorporated into somebody else's game. Comedy serves as a play-ground for unexpected encounters and responses. By watching these unexpected interactions, the audience, too, is incorporated into the culture of performance. Immigrant comedies at their best can train spectators in not taking themselves too seriously. Through strategies of ethnic role-play, distancing and disguise, irreverence and reversal, stepping outside and back inside, mimicking and mocking social conventions,

¹⁵ See Adelson.

they have the power to destabilize discourses and iconographies of power. In the current climate of ethnic tribalism and fetishization of cultural difference, it is all the more important that we take on board playful approaches to identity as they are enacted in comedies. In fact, it is a highly political project to assume a critical look at the formation of exclusive ethnic or nationalist identities. We need more of this ironic, irreverent spirit to counteract essentialist notions of territorially rooted identities.

Let us remember at this point Kafka's ape Rotpeter, addressing the academy with a satirical account of his transformation into a human being—in "A Report for an Academy," a story which was first published in 1917 in Max Brod's Zionist journal *Der Jude* and which has lately been reappropriated in German speaking territories in the new climate of minority rights and multiculturalism, not only in a number of stage performances, but also in the publicity work of women running a center for migrant women and sex workers in Linz.¹⁶ Like the ape Rotpeter, the clever migrant knows that s/he is always already a performer, so why not turn it into a strength, play the perfect monkey and address the Academy. After all, there is no easy solution in returning back to the roots or in retreating into a supposedly stable identity beyond role-play.

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¹⁶ See Caixeta/Salgado.

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Transfer/Images: Trauma, Memory, History

KAJA SILVERMAN

The Cure by Love

Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais' film, *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959) is seemingly a film about a woman's failure to see.¹ This woman is a French actress, in the last day and a half of an extended stay in Hiroshima. She has been brought there by an international film production, which has engaged her as an actress. In her own mind, though, this woman is in Hiroshima more as a spectator than as an actress—as a spectator of Hiroshima itself. "Hiroshima," moreover, signifies for her not the place in which she presently finds herself, but rather the city which is no more, the city destroyed by the atomic bomb.

In the hope of seeing Hiroshima, the French actress visits the hospital where victims of the atomic bomb were treated, and some still remain. She goes four times to the memorial museum. She looks at newsreels documenting the destruction wrought by the bomb on food, water, and buildings. She stands before piles of hair that fell from the heads of women when they awoke the day after the bomb was dropped; sees skin that was flayed off bodies by the fiery heat and looks at photographic evidence of limbs that have been twisted into unrecognizable shapes through atomic poisoning.

The day before her return to Paris, the actress lies in bed with a man she has just met, an architect and native resident of Hiroshima. It is here that Duras begins her script, and Resnais his film.² The French woman tells the Japanese man, whose parents were present at the moment the bomb was dropped, that she has seen Hiroshima. "I saw everything," she says; "Eve-

¹ Although Alain Resnais directed *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Marguerite Duras wrote the script. And crucial as Resnais' contribution to the final product is, the film is already implicit to an unusual degree in the script. I will consequently refer to Duras and Resnais throughout this essay as co-authors of *Hiroshima, mon amour*.

rything." "You saw nothing in Hiroshima," he responds, "Nothing." The woman reiterates her claim: "I saw it. I'm sure I did." But the word "everything" fails to connect up with Hiroshima. It signifies in turn the hospital, the newsreels, and the documentary evidence and reconstructive films in the museum. At one point, it even signifies the other visitors in the museum. And over and over again, the Japanese man denies that she has seen anything.

Hiroshima, mon amour is also seemingly a film about the impossibility of remembering. During the German occupation of France, the French actress will later tell the Japanese man, she was a young girl in Nevers, in love with a German soldier. On the day of the liberation, she was to return with him to Bavaria, to become his wife. But on this very day, the day when her impossible love was to become finally possible, the German soldier was killed by one of the residents of Nevers. The young girl found him as he was dying, and lay with him until his lifeless body was removed the next morning. For a year she mourned him so profoundly that she was in effect blind; she saw nothing but him. So absolute was her scopic fidelity that when the townspeople of Nevers cut off her hair to punish her for collaborating with an enemy, she was hardly aware of being in the public square.

The young girl not only mourned her lover, but determined to continue mourning him. She fortified herself against the possibility of forgetting the German soldier by allowing no contact between her memories of him and her subsequent life. She related the story of her first love to no one, lest it fade like a ghost in the light of day. She left Nevers forever, so that it, too, would remain both itself encrypted, and a crypt for the German soldier. She attempted to become the stone in which his shadow was forever etched.³

² The script of *Hiroshima mon amour* is available in English and in French.

³ This is a metaphor the French woman herself uses. In the opening scene of the film, she tells the Japanese man: "I wanted to have an inconsolable memory, a memory of shadows and stones." As she says these words, the camera cuts to a shadow, "photographed" on stone, of a person who died at Hiroshima.

But the French woman was unable to keep the memory of her dead lover forever alive. Over time, her memories of him grew fainter and fainter, until they were hardly recognizable. She began to see the world around her once again. Now, in Hiroshima, comes the ultimate betrayal: she tells the story of her impossible love to the Japanese man. She gives to a second man what belongs to the first: herself. "I told our story," she says to her dead lover in a voice-over monologue late in the film; "I was unfaithful to you tonight with this stranger. I told our story. It was, you see, a story that could be told."

For the French woman, this is no ordinary infidelity; with the recounting of her memories about the German soldier, she has relegated him to oblivion. "Look how I'm forgetting you . . . Look how I've forgotten you. Look at me," she says a moment later. She has also defined herself as ineradicably unfaithful. If she has given what belongs to the German soldier to the Japanese architect, it is only a matter of time until she will repeat her betrayal with a third man. So certain of this is the French woman, that she experiences her seemingly unavoidable future as a present reality. It is not that she will have betrayed the Japanese man; she has already done so. "I'll forget you! I'm forgetting you already! Look how I'm forgetting you! Look at me!" she says to him in the closing moments of the film, in a nearly exact repetition of what she earlier utters in front of the mirror.

In the scene in which the French woman recounts the story of her first love to the Japanese architect, he makes much the same claim. "In a few years, when I'll have forgotten you, and when other such adventures, from sheer habit, will happen to me, I'll remember you as the symbol of love's forgetfulness," he tells her; "I'll think of this adventure as the horror of oblivion." In characterizing "oblivion" as a horror, he also seems to refer back to the other story Duras and Resnais tell. He seems, that is, to make forgetfulness the master trope for understanding not only the French woman's relationship both to himself and the German soldier, but also her blindness with respect to the atomic cataclysm. And if she cannot see Hiroshima because she has forgotten it, then it is presumably only through remembering it that she will be able to see it once again.

In the scenes in which the actress recalls her German lover, she not only repeatedly equates seeing with remembering, but also equates remembering with seeing. She thereby makes clear that those terms are synonymous for her. She also helps us to understand the very special meaning which seeing has for her. To look in the way the French woman seeks to look at Hiroshima does not mean to open one's eyes to perceptual stimuli. Rather, it means to close them. It means to hold the past before one as a present reality, to the exclusion of all else: to see it and nothing else. It means to apprehend what was as if it still were.⁴

Such scopic fidelity poses even greater difficulties in the case of Hiroshima than it does in the case of the German soldier. Whereas the German soldier was once a perceptual reality for her, Hiroshima never was. As Duras and Resnais emphasize, she has no memories of the atomic destruction to forget. On the day on which the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, she was a young girl in Paris for the first time. The weather was beautiful, and the destruction visited on a distant city signified for her and her compatriots not the death and maiming of hundreds of thousands of people and countless animals, but "the end of the war." In order to see Hiroshima, in the sense that she defines seeing, the French woman must experience not her own past in the form of the perceptual present, but someone else's. She must remember what has never happened to her.

As the images accompanying her narration in the opening scene of *Hiroshima, mon amour* indicate, the actress attempts to do so by looking not with her own look at the past, but rather with those of an anonymous assortment of eye-witnesses. Resnais underscores this strange desubjectification of her look in a number of ways. As she speaks, he shows us images depicting what she claims to have seen: the hospital, the memorial museum, newsreels and fictional reconstructions of the bomb damage. However, these images include no point-of-view shots, and no alternating shots of the French woman looking. Nothing connects them back to her. This sequence consequently does not function as a conventional flashback, al-

⁴ Consequently, as Caruth notes, to see the world around her once again constitutes for the French woman the very epitome of betrayal (30-32).

though it accompanies a narrative about what the speaker herself has supposedly seen.

At one moment in the opening scene, the actress abandons her claim to have seen Hiroshima, and says instead that she has forgotten Hiroshima, just as the architect has forgotten it. But this is only an apparent contradiction of her earlier assertion. In telling the architect that she has forgotten Hiroshima, she is really purporting to have succeeded in installing within her psyche a memory of it, and so to have seen it in the distant, if not the recent past. As she says a moment later: "Like you, I have a memory. I know what it is to forget." Not surprisingly, the architect now assails not only her claim to have seen, but the prior one upon which it is based. "No, you don't have a memory," he tells her.

We are not surprised by the Japanese man's vehemence. Both the French woman's claim to remember what she has not lived through and her repeated assertion that to remember Hiroshima is to see it seem nothing less than sacrilegious. Surely the traumatic past belongs to those who have experienced it. Have they not paid with their suffering for their exclusive right to remember it, represent it, or talk about it? And is the verb "to see" not a very inappropriate one to use in this context? Presumably even those who lived through Hiroshima cannot be said to have "seen" it. To "see" something implies having a certain distance from it. Like the victims of the Shoah, those who lived through the atomic cataclysm must have been much too deep inside it to have looked at it.

But *Hiroshima, mon amour* does not finally tell us that the French woman cannot see Hiroshima either because she has no right to do so, or because it is ultimately unseeable. Indeed, it does not even tell us that the French woman fails in her scopical project. On the contrary, it shows her working toward the possibility of seeing Hiroshima, and finally succeeding in doing so. *Hiroshima, mon amour* also insists upon the importance, for Hiroshima, of this look. Indeed, Duras and Resnais suggests that without it, Hiroshima cannot fully be Hiroshima. Finally, *Hiroshima, mon amour* does not effect a one-to-one equation of seeing and forgetting. On the

contrary, it shows a certain kind of forgetting to be the precondition for Hiroshima to appear.

In her "Synopsis" of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Duras maintains that the story of Hiroshima and the story of love are linked not through analogy, but rather through *incorporation*.⁵ In writing the script, she tells us, she sought not to dramatize horror through horror, but rather to make what the bomb had destroyed rise again from its ashes. The agency of this regeneration is the love of the French woman for the Japanese man:

The Japanese is married, has children. So is the French woman. . . . Theirs is a one-night affair. But where? At Hiroshima. Their embrace—so banal, so commonplace—takes place in the one city of the world where it is hardest to imagine it: Hiroshima. Nothing is "given" at Hiroshima. Every gesture, every word, takes on an aura of meaning that transcends its literal meaning. And this is one of the principal goals of the film: to . . . make this horror rise again from its ashes by incorporating it in a love that will necessarily be special and "wonderful," one that will be more credible than if it had occurred anywhere else in the world
(9)

To incorporate something is to put it in the body of another thing.⁶ It is thereby to carry it away from itself—to make it something else. Duras does not attempt to minimize this point. A passage from John Hersey's account of the damage done to Hiroshima by the atomic bomb (91-92) is the apparent inspiration for the one I have just quoted from the "Synopsis."

⁵ Resnais also emphasizes the non-analogical relation of the story of the bomb and the story of love in his "Réponse à Michel Delahaye": "J'ai lu avec effarement que certain mettaient en balance l'explosion de la bombe et le drame de Nevers comme si l'un avait voulu être l'équivalent de l'autre. Ce n'est pas du tout cela" (154).

⁶ Duras herself uses a slightly different metaphor. Where the translator uses "incorporation," she uses "faire s'inscrire en." She says: "Et c'est là un des desseins majeurs du film. . . . faire renaître cette horreur de ces cendres en la faisant s'inscrire en un amour qui sera forcément particulier et 'émerveillant.'" Duras' own text thus characterizes the return of the past within the present more as a signifying operation—as the inscription of one thing within another—than as a reembodiment. I have nevertheless taken the liberty of using the word "incorporation" here because in the Hersey paraphrase this inscription of one thing within another so clearly involves a recorporealization.

Significantly, Duras includes in her script and Resnais in his film an almost verbatim quotation of this passage.⁷ In so doing, they provide one of most shocking images imaginable of incorporation. "Hiroshima was blanketed with flowers," the French woman says in the opening scene of *Hiroshima, mon amour*; "There were cornflowers and gladiolas everywhere, and morning glories and day lilies that rose again from the ashes with an extraordinary vigor, quite unheard of for flowers till then" (19).

Upon a first viewing of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, it is difficult not to be appalled by this horticultural profusion. The atomic flowers seem a travesty of what was, a hideous betrayal of those out of whose ashes they sprang. However, Duras and Resnais work had to make possible a different reading. They help us to understand that, in addition to being the source of immeasurable suffering and loss, the bomb was the agent of a massive decorporealization. It removed hundreds of thousands of creatures over night from their bodies, and so from the world. Only through being embodied in a new form can these creatures can become visible to us once more, and so secure a place again within the world.

There is another reason as well why *Hiroshima mon amour* encourages us to be receptive to the manifold forms in which what has been lost can return. It makes the bomb representative not only of the destruction of a Japanese city by the Allies in 1945, but also of the derealizing effect our look has upon the world whenever we absent ourselves psychically from the present. As its main narrative clearly shows, we absent ourselves psychically from the present when we refuse to allow it to reincarnate what we have previously cared about.

To see the past within the present, on the other hand, is not only to resurrect the dead, but also to confer Being or a kind of more-than-reality upon the living. In both of the passages I quoted a moment ago, Duras stresses the transfigurative effect upon what might be called the "host body" of its incorporation of the past. In embodying Hiroshima, the love of the French woman and the Japanese man becomes more than itself; it

⁷ Duras herself identifies it as such (English script 19; French script 21).

"takes on an aura of meaning that transcends its literal meaning." What would otherwise be "banal" and "commonplace" becomes "special" and "wonderful." The fertilization of the cornflowers and gladiolas with the ashes of Hiroshima has a similar consequence: those flowers grew with an "extraordinary vigor, quite unheard of . . . till then."

The incorporation which the Hershey passage dramatizes is one which the look could only passively witness. However, the incorporation described by Duras in the "Synopsis" clearly requires the look for its implementation. The love between the French woman and the Japanese man can reembody Hiroshima and thereby transcend its intrinsic banality only to the degree that we allow it to. Duras and Resnais foreground the necessary participation of the spectator in this miraculous transformation in the opening images of *Hiroshima, mon amour*.

In this sequence, the limbs of two interlocked bodies move slowly, as if in the throes of death. They are covered by ashes, as if they have been caught in a fiery conflagration. Through a dissolve, the ashes give way to a glistening dew, which the still lethargic movements of the two bodies encourage us to attribute to chemical contamination rather than rain. And then, through another dissolve, the scene of death gives way to a scene of love. The two bodies now appear to be locked in an embrace. What seemed in the previous two shots to be a lethargy on the verge of inertia is transformed into a post-coital torpor.

On a first screening of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, this sequence is unintelligible. We literally do not know what we are seeing. Only at the end of the film are we in a position to look at it again, differently, and to allow it to enact the regeneration described by Duras in the "Synopsis." This is not because the meaning which the opening sequence contains is then fully available. Rather, it is because it is only then that we understand the central role which we as spectators must play if the past is to live again in a redemptive way within the present.

Surprisingly, it is our own dead that *Hiroshima, mon amour* encourages us to find again in the bodies of the lovers, not those killed in Hiroshima in 1945. It is everything that we ourselves have loved and lost that Giovanni

Fusco's music and Sacha Vierny and Takahashi Michio's lighting invite us to enfold into their embrace. The French woman is our model in this respect. *Hiroshima, mon amour* shows her arriving at the possibility of seeing Hiroshima not by assuming other people's memories, but rather by incorporating her own past into contemporary Hiroshima. At the moment that she is able to apprehend the German soldier in the form of the Japanese man, the scales finally fall from her eyes.

By making this subjective appropriation exemplary of true vision, *Hiroshima, mon amour* teaches us a lesson which runs directly counter to all of our usual assumptions about what it means to treat another person, another culture, or another nation with respect. It helps us to understand that other creatures and things can only be "themselves" if we make them our own—that they can only be free if we first claim them. *Hiroshima, mon amour* also gives the lie to the assumption that through our revisions and reconstruction of the past we cannot help but betray it. It suggests that it is only through reconstituting what we have loved in a new form that we can be true to it.⁸

As critics of *Hiroshima, mon amour* have often noted, the scene in which the French woman recounts the story of her first love to the Japanese man is evocative in a number of respects of psychoanalytic transference.⁹ In both cases, one person occupies the structural role of speaker, and the other that of listener. In both cases, the speaker also transfers on to the listener feelings that she earlier felt in relation to someone else, and—in the process—reenacts in the present what belongs to the past. And in both cases this reenactment serves to bring into the open what would otherwise remain hidden from view.

⁸ For a much fuller elaboration of the theoretical argument at the heart of this essay, see my *World Spectators*.

⁹ See, for instance, Sweet 29-30; Benayoun 64; Ropars-Wuilleumier 180-81.

In the therapeutic context, it is of course the analysand who talks, and the analyst who listens; the analysand who transfers onto the analyst feelings which have their origin elsewhere; and the analysand who thereby brings into the present what happened long ago.¹⁰ In *Hiroshima, mon amour*, it is the French woman who speaks, and the Japanese man who listens. Beginning in the bedroom of the man's Hiroshima apartment, and continuing later in a city bar, the woman recounts the story of her love for the German soldier. This story constitutes what Freud would call "the repressed." As the actress says, "Nevers is the city in the world, and even the thing in the world, I dream about most often at night" yet "think about the least." Her narration thereby serves to make what has been repressed available to consciousness. And what permits the actress to exhume what has been buried in this way is her displacement onto the Japanese architect of her love for the German soldier.

The Japanese man not only listens in a very psychoanalytic way to the French woman's reminiscences; he actively solicits the transference which makes those reminiscences possible. At the end of the scene immediately preceding their conversation in the bar, he says: "All we can do now is kill the time before your departure." The phrase "kill time" ostensibly means "while away the hours," but the bar scene shows the actress and the architect literally killing time: annihilating the present tense by revivifying the past. It is, moreover, the Japanese man who first initiates the process of recollecting what has been as if it still is. He does so by assuming the place of the German soldier. "When you are in the cellar, am I dead?" he asks. Later, when she says "I call you softly," he responds: "But I'm dead."

But several crucial features of the psychoanalytic transference which are operative in the scenes where the French woman tells the story of her first love have been generally overlooked. First, what is exposed through the transference is not simply a memory or series of memories, but the paradigm according to which the analysand desires. As Freud tells us in

¹⁰ I draw here upon Freud's account of transference, as he presents it in *Remembering and Transference-Love*.

"The Dynamics of Transference," our object-choices are not random. Rather,

. . . each individual . . . has acquired a specific method of his own in the conduct of his erotic life . . . that is, in the preconditions of falling in love which he lays down, in the instincts he satisfies and the aims he sets himself in the course of it. (99)

The names for this libidinal paradigm are many. Freud characterizes it as a "stereotype plate" which is "constantly reprinted afresh" in "the course of the person's life" (*Dynamics* 99-100); Laplanche and Pontalis think of it as a governing fantasy, which surfaces over and over again in dreams, parapraxes, and neurotic symptoms (314-18); and Lacan refers to it as a language (*Function* 30-113). This stereotype-plate, governing fantasy or language of desire determines the range of possible displacements a person can make.

Hiroshima, mon amour also lays bare what might be called the "hidden parameters" of desire, although it is closer to Lacan than to Freud in the way it conceptualizes these parameters. The film suggests that what makes love possible is not so much a relatively inert stereotype plate as a constellation of unconscious memories. These memories entertain signifying relationships to each other; as a result of having been combined with and substituted for each other, every one of them refers back and points forward to many others. Indeed, they constitute a language—the language of our desire.¹¹

The French woman's language of desire might be called "Nevers." Because the Japanese man understands this before she does, it is always about Nevers that he induces her to speak. When she asks why, he answers that "it was there, I seem to understand, that you must have begun to be what you are today." Later, after she has begun mobilizing her language of desire, she too calls it by its name. "I was born in Nevers," she tells the

¹¹ Lacan provides perhaps his most lucid and compelling account of the way in which unconscious memories signify—as well as the one with the greatest resonance for *Hiroshima, mon amour* (*The Seminar* 1-127).

architect, "I grew up in Nevers. I learned how to read in Nevers. And it was there I became twenty."

Nevers is the Japanese man's conversational topic of choice not only because it defines the actress, but also because it is only her relationship to the German soldier which has made possible her relationship to him. As he puts it, "it was there . . . that I almost . . . lost you . . . and that I risked never knowing you." Without those war-time trysts with an occupying soldier, *Hiroshima, mon amour* makes clear, there would be no post-war romance with the stranger in Hiroshima.

What is also left out of most psychoanalytic accounts of the scene in which the French woman tells the Japanese man the story of her love for the German soldier is that the function of the transference is not only to make the analysand aware of the language which she is unwittingly speaking, but also to undo a libidinal fixation. The analysand described by Freud might be said to be in thrall to a memory to which she cannot help but return: to be arrested at the site of a particular signifier. This analysand is unable to displace, and so to form new signifying relations.

As Freud explains in another crucial passage from "The Dynamics of Transference," a portion of every patient's "libidinal impulses has been held up in the course of development; it has been kept away from the conscious personality and from reality, and has either been prevented from further expansion except in phantasy or has remained wholly in the unconscious so that it is unknown to the personality's consciousness." The analytic treatment seeks, through the transference, "to track down the libido, to make it accessible to consciousness and, in the end, serviceable for reality" (100-102). It attempts to open the path to displacement—to make it possible for the analysand to form relationships between what was and what is.

Hiroshima, mon amour provides us with a striking case of libidinal fixation. In her fear of being unfaithful to the memory of the German soldier, the French woman has isolated it from all else; she has prevented that memory from forming links both with memories from other times and places, and with the perceptual present. We see her both accessing this

buried memory and putting it into communication with the present in the scenes in the bedroom and restaurant.

Finally, as Freud makes clear in *Interpretation of Dreams* (509), as well as in his essays on transference, it is primarily in the form of visual perceptions that unconscious memories return. These memories may assume the guise of what was, or what is, but in either case it is first and foremost to the look that they appeal. And Freud writes that although he always made every effort to help his patients to translate their memories into words, and—in so doing—to relegate them to the past, he finally came to understand that even in the therapeutic context they could not help but re-enact them to some degree as present perceptions (*Pleasure Principle* 18-19).

Hiroshima, mon amour also consistently associates remembering with looking. Although the French woman narrates her story in words, Resnais makes clear that it is transpiring for her visually. He stages the actress' first memory of Nevers emphatically as a drama of vision. We see her standing just inside her hotel room, looking, and then a reverse shot of what she sees: the body of the sleeping architect, and most particularly his twitching hand. The camera cuts back to another shot of the French woman looking at the Japanese man in her Hiroshima hotel room, and then provides a second shot of what she sees: the hand of the dying German soldier. In the scenes in which the Japanese man helps the French woman to remember Nevers, Resnais also cuts several times on the look from the present scene to a past scene. As a result, the flashback structure which is missing in the earlier scene is emphatically in place. By portraying the process of remembering in such emphatically scopic terms, *Hiroshima, mon amour* also suggests that our language of desire is more visual than verbal—that it is through the look rather than the word that unconscious signification occurs.

But although the similarities between the psychoanalytic transference and *Hiroshima, mon amour* are even more profound than is generally assumed, there are some crucial differences. The role which the architect plays in the two scenes in which the French woman remembers the German soldier is in many respects the opposite of that ideally played by the analyst. Rather than attempting to function as a surface onto which she can displace her feelings for the German soldier, he encourages her to remake the latter in his own image. And rather than figuring only as a temporary stand-in for what could not otherwise be seen, he insists upon his status as her new lover.¹² The architect also invites the actress to put him in the position she originally reserves for Hiroshima. In the opening scene of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, after repeatedly denying that she has in fact seen anything, he anticipates the moment when looking will become a possibility for her, not only in the future, but also—retroactively—in the past. However, what he predicts her seeing, in the strong sense of the word, is not Hiroshima, but himself. "You will have seen me," he tells the French woman.

These strange differences which transect the many similarities which link *Hiroshima, mon amour* to the therapeutic transference help us to understand that what the film dramatizes is finally more the cure by love than the cure by psychoanalysis.¹³ The psychoanalytic cure brings about the end of a pathological love relation, ostensibly to free the subject for future, non-pathological relations. Those relations, however, lie outside its province. The psychoanalytic cure is even in a certain sense a-relational. Although it precipitates a new libidinal relation in the form of the transference, it is not complete until this relation has been dissolved. The analysand must not only fall in love with the analyst, but out of love with him.

What Freud calls "the cure by love," on the other hand, represents the triumph of relationality; it is a cure through and for displacement. The cure

¹² As Sweet puts it, "his concern is not totally disinterested" (30).

¹³ Freud distinguishes between the cure by therapy and the cure by love in "Jensen's *Gradiva*" (88-90).

by love frees us from fixation through the formation of a new libidinal relation. Indeed, its whole point is to bring about the reconstitution of the past in the guise of the present. To the degree that what was asserts its priority over what is, the cure by love has failed.

Although Freud himself tells us that we must love or fall ill, we are not accustomed to conceptualizing love as a cure (*Narcissism* 85). We are generally less aware of its medicinal properties than of its powers of intoxication. This is because we are accustomed to thinking in narcissistic ways about love. *Hiroshima, mon amour* encourages us to approach this topic from the other direction: from the direction of what is loved. It asks us to conceptualize love not in the form either of the aggrandizement or rapture of the one who loves, but rather in the form of care for the world. It suggests that creatures and things are in need of this care because without it they cannot help but suffer from the most serious of all maladies: invisibility.

Hiroshima, mon amour is in a complex implicit dialogue in this respect with Freud's case history of President Schreber. Although *Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia* is generally read as Freud's primary contribution to the theorization of paranoia, it also represents one of psychoanalysis' most important accounts of the malady I have just described. Freud characterizes Schreber's illness as the failure of his capacity to love—as the withdrawal "from the people in his environment and from the external world generally of the libidinal cathexis which he has hitherto directed on to them." As a result, "everything has become indifferent and irrelevant to him" (69-70).

As if to make evident that there is more at issue in the case of Schreber than a lonely psyche, Freud underscores that figure's own sense that a "great catastrophe" is imminent: the end of the world as such. Freud also provides by way of a commentary upon this state of affairs the following quotation from Goethe's *Faust*, which attributes to Schreber's subjective state a surprising effectivity with respect to the larger environment: "Woe! Woe!/Thou hast it destroyed,/The beautiful world,/With powerful fist!/In ruins 'tis hurled,/By the blow of a demigod shattered! . . . Mightier/For the

children of men,/More splendid/Build it again,/In thine own bosom build it anew!"

Hiroshima, mon amour also tells the story of a subject's affective incapacity. When the Japanese architect asks the French woman what the atomic bomb meant to her, she at first responds "the end of the war." She then adds: "Amazement . . . at the idea that they had dared . . . amazement at the idea that they had succeeded. And then too, for us, the beginning of an unknown fear. And then, indifference. And also the fear of indifference . . ." Fear of indifference would seem to describe precisely the psychic condition of the actress at the beginning of *Hiroshima, mon amour*. Hiroshima does not matter to her, but she feels that it should. She goes to the memorial museum and looks at documentary records and fictional reconstructions of the destruction wrought on that city by the atomic bomb precisely in the hope that they will make it possible for her to surmount her indifference.

In her conversation with the architect at the beginning of the film, she attempts to persuade both him and herself that she has looked in an affectively engaged way at this material. She even offers her tears as proof that she cares about Hiroshima. "The reconstructions have been made as authentically as possible. The films have been made as authentically as possible," the French woman says. "The illusion, it's quite simple, the illusion is so perfect that the tourists cry. One can always scoff, but what else can a tourist do but cry? I've always wept over the fate of Hiroshima." But what the Japanese man says in return suggests that the woman cried less because she cared than because she could not care: because, no more than the testimonial evidence of piles of hair and pieces of detached skin, or the twisted metal of a burned bicycle, are the filmic reconstructions sufficient to arouse in her a sense of personal concern. She cannot care because that which alone would permit her to do so—the memory of the German soldier—is sequestered in an inaccessible region of her psyche: because it does not inform what she sees. "No," is the architect's response to her account of her tears; "What would you have cried about?"

Like Freud, Duras and Resnais also stress the devastating effects upon the world of this indifference. Indeed, they draw an implicit analogy between the destruction wrought on Hiroshima by the atomic bomb, and the destruction wrought on that city by the actress' inability to care about it. But if Freud's Schreber case history can help us to understand what is most at issue in *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Duras and Resnais' film clarifies in turn a number of points which remain obscure in the psychoanalytic text.

First, *Hiroshima, mon amour* shows that care comes into play primarily at the level of vision. When we care about something, we *see* it. We allow it to appear. This is a world-making event in the ontological rather than the existential sense of the word. Appearance represents the inauguration not of "being," in the simple sense of the word, but rather of Being. What appears shines for us; it is radiant. It has that perceptual vividness and intensity that we normally encounter only in our dreams.

Second, *Hiroshima, mon amour* helps us to understand why it is that Freud identifies the necessary locus of the world as the human breast: why a creature or thing can appear only when we appropriate it psychically. Resnais and Duras show us that other beings can only become visible for us, in the strong sense of the word, by becoming the transformative reincarnation of what we have previously loved. They can only appear, and so *Be*, if we allow them to figure forth in a new form that constellation of memories which determines what we care about. This means inserting them into that network of signifiers which most profoundly defines what each of us is.

In the scenes inside his apartment and the Hiroshima bar, the Japanese man succeeds in inducing the French actress to remember Nevers. For the first time in fourteen years, she speaks about what matters to her. Nevers also becomes visible to her once again: she sees the German soldier in the Japanese man sitting before her. "You are dead. . . . I call you softly. . . . [I] scream [y]our German name," she says as she looks at him; "I only have one memory left, your name." And as if to make evident that it is first and

foremost at the site of the look that this condensation is effected, Resnais cuts from shots of the actress looking to close-ups of the architect. He also shows us the French woman looking at the Japanese man as she equates him verbally with the German soldier, thereby indicating that she is seeing the one in the form of the other. However, although the actress has established a semiotic connection between the past and the present, she is not yet looking in the mode of care. No more than in the opening scene of the film does anything in this scene appear.

Appearance is a complex event, and one which exceeds our usual explanatory categories. It is neither strictly subjective, nor strictly objective; rather, it occurs only where there is a "meeting" of look and world.¹⁴ This is because although we alone can look in the way which releases the world into its Being, we do not ever ourselves initiate this action. On the contrary, when we light up the world in this way we are always responding to its own appeal to be so illuminated. Creatures and things might be said to intend toward appearance: to solicit the performance of the action in which we engage when we speak our language of desire. The Being which we confer upon creatures and things is thus paradoxically their essence; we do not so much "create" it as "disclose" it.

It is not only that we cannot by ourselves release other beings into their Being. We are also powerless by ourselves actually to see. Looking can only take place where there are perceptual forms. This is because it is only within the infinitely variegated bodies of other worldly beings that our desire can take shape. Without those bodies we would literally see nothing, no matter how strong the force of our desire. Appearance is therefore not just a disclosure; it is a co-disclosure—an event requiring two participants.

In the scenes in which she recollects Nevers, the French woman begins speaking her language of desire, but in a way which excludes the perceptual object. Although she has created a signifying relation between past and present, it is at the expense of the present. She is not seeing the German soldier in the guise of the Japanese man, but rather the Japanese man

¹⁴ As Heidegger puts it in *Parmenides*: "appearance . . . is . . . a self-showing that meets a reception and a perception" (136).

in the guise of the German soldier; she is not recorporealizing the past, that is, but rather decorporalizing the present.

In the immediately following scene, the semiotic relationship between German soldier and the Japanese man begins to shift. The French woman returns briefly to her hotel room. She rinses her face in the bathroom sink, and looks at herself in the mirror. As she does so, she addresses her dead lover in the form of what Duras calls an "interior dialogue" (73). In this interior dialogue she confides that the past is for her no longer a present reality, but rather a "story" about things that took place fourteen years ago. More recent events are also beginning to assert their priority over it.

In the subsequent sequence in which the French woman walks at night through the streets of Hiroshima, she speaks again in an interior dialogue. Her point of address is now no longer unequivocally her dead lover. "I meet you," says the actress. Here, "you" seems to signify the Japanese man. "I remember you," she adds a moment later, now clearly speaking to the German soldier. "This city was made to the size of love. You were made to the size of my body," are the next words she utters. Here, it is impossible to say whether with the word "city" she means Nevers or Hiroshima, just as it is to know whether with the pronoun "you" she is speaking to the German or the Japanese man. As if to underscore this undecidability, the actress herself asks: "Who are you?" A moment later, the point of address stabilizes, but it is now the Japanese architect rather than the dead soldier to whom the French woman speaks.

During this sequence, Resnais cross-cuts between shots of the streets of Nevers, and shots of the streets of Hiroshima. The shots of Nevers show a city untouched by modernity. Hiroshima, on the other hand, is here—as elsewhere—emphatically a metropolis from 1959. By day it consists of International-style architecture, and by night of neon lights. We understand now what we have not fully grasped before: Nevers signifies memory, the past. Hiroshima, on the other hand, represents the perceptual present. To see Hiroshima thus necessarily means to see it as it now is, rather than as it once was.

In the bus station scene which follows, the actress finally embraces the imperative to forget the past. She conjures up Nevers once more, but only to say good-bye to it. "Lovely poplar trees of Nièvre, I offer you to oblivion. . . . Silly little girl, who dies of love at Nevers. Little girl with shaven head, I bequeath you to oblivion." Oblivion, she goes on to say, begins with the eyes. *Hiroshima, mon amour* proves the truth of this axiom. As the actress speaks, the camera holds on a series of by now emotionally charged images of the Loire, the houses and fields of Nevers, the German soldier. Resnais makes the cinematic image say not—as is usually the case—"this is," but rather: "this was."

In the final scene of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, the Japanese architect comes to the actress' hotel room, where she awaits him, "I'll forget you!," she cries in despair, as he enters; "Look how I'm forgetting you." One last time, she assimilates the Japanese man to the German soldier, and responds with horror to the possibility that she might in the future see something other than what she has already seen in the past. But a moment later, something extraordinary occurs. The world approaches the look in the form of the Japanese man, and the look approaches the world in the form of the French woman. As a result of this miraculous convergence, Hiroshima at last appears. Once again Hiroshima signifies both the city that now is, rather than the city which previously was, and the perceptual present in some larger sense. But what exists no longer manifests itself in its everyday guise; rather, through its incorporation of an alien past, it has become "wonderful" and "special."

The look brings memory to its meeting with the world, and the world itself the new body in which memory is now to be housed. But each participant in the co-disclosure of Hiroshima names not what he or she brings, but rather what the other provides. "Hi-ro-shi-ma," says the French woman; "Hi-ro-shi-ma. That's your name." "That's my name," responds the architect; "Yes. Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers-in France." Since it is with these last words that *Hiroshima, mon amour* ends, it might seem that Duras and Resnais nevertheless privilege the role played by the look over that played by the world. Without the German soldier, they once again empha-

size, there can be no Japanese lover. However, the French woman finally succeeds in seeing Hiroshima only after the architect has grabbed her arm, and looked intently at her. Her look could even be said to originate in his, and to be enabled by it.¹⁵

The film thus in fact ends with a striking dramatization of the intentionality of the world to appear. But what is *Hiroshima, mon amour* in its entirety if not a demonstration of the same thing? At every moment in her long journey toward vision, the actress is responding to a solicitation from outside. Her process of recollection is externally driven. She displaces her desire from the German soldier to the Japanese architect in response to his appeal to her to do so. Finally, it is not for her own sake that she either remembers or displaces; it is, rather, for the sake of Hiroshima. But it is only via the last exchange between the French woman and the Japanese architect that we are ready to learn the very unpsychoanalytic lesson which this profoundly psychoanalytic film has to teach us: the world is not "for" us; rather, it is we who are "for" the world.

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¹⁵ Heidegger also suggests that the look which makes possible appearance might be said to originate in the world itself in *Parmenides*: "What shines is what shows itself to a looking. What appears to the looking is the sight that solicits man and addresses him, the look" (107).

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Crash: ". . . at an indeterminate moment, indeterminate places . . ."

My motto for this essay comes from the *Diary* of Witold Gombrowicz, in which he stakes a natural and seemingly common, unremarkable micro-pain against the cultural, exceptional, and thus remarkable macro-pain generated by the holocausts of history, and then relates what he considers a universal pain inextricably to his own writing: "right now as I am writing this, a small fish close to the Galapagos-Islands is crossing the threshold of hell because another fish has just devoured its tail" (*Diary I* 191).¹

Overture

Many recent investigations have situated the logic of trauma at the nexus of poetics, politics and visual representation. This is not surprising, given



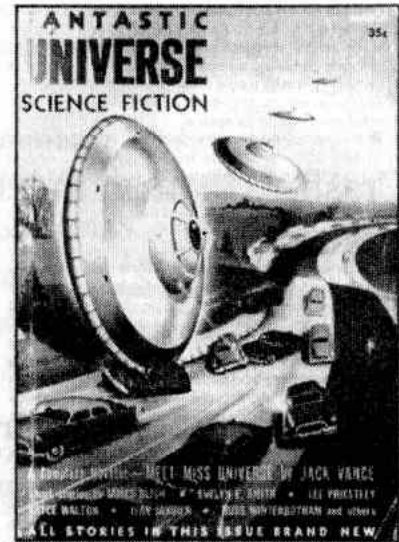
Still from *A Clockwork Orange*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick, GB 1970/71.

that our cultural image-repertoire is full of traumatic images and atrocity exhibitions which we are often forced to watch—like Alex in *Clockwork Orange*—with 'eyes clamped wide open.' One image almost nobody will have escaped and which will trigger a host of others is, in

¹ "To put it coldly: what is the pain of a million slaves or a hundred-million-body morgue?" (*Diary I* 191). This devaluation of 'remarkable pain' implies a revaluation of 'unremarkable pain' As he states a bit later, "pain is pain wherever it occurs, equally horrifying in man as in a fly; in us the experience of pure suffering has become informed, our hell has become universal" (*Diary II* 28).



Eddie Adams, *Police Chief Saigon* 1968. From: Pultz 116. © The Associated Press.



From: Ballard, *Re/Search* 118.

the words of J.G. Ballard: "the tragic photograph of the Saigon police chief shooting a Viet Cong suspect in the head" (*Atrocity* 16).

Ballard then continues, in a curious but symptomatic swerve, to note his specific punctum in the image: "If I remember, the tilt of the dying man's head was slightly exaggerated, like a stylized coke bottle or a tail-fin" (16)—the fin here being not that of a fish, but that of an American car. Although at first sight a cynical juxtaposition, Ballard's comparison points, metonymically, by way of the bottle of Coca-Cola and the detail of a neo-baroque American car, to the absent presence of America in the Vietnam war and in the image. It is in tune with Ballard's obsession with topology that America is present not in any figural sense, but in the exaggerated geometry of the image of terror.

In what follows, I will attempt to delineate the diagram of a 'traumatic logic.' In doing so, I will concentrate on what seems to me an almost paradigmatic traumatic motif: exploding and injured heads. In particular, I will focus on injured heads in car-accidents. In his movie *Wild at Heart*, David Lynch shows the two protagonists, who are fleeing from the 'wicked witch,' encountering the aftermath of a car accident. When they approach the scene, they see amongst the wreckage and the corpses, a girl walking around the crash debris in search of her purse. Clearly in shock, the girl does not realize that she is seriously wounded. When she sits down to

scratch her head, the camera shows her finger actually touching and probing into the head injury that will cause her death a few moments later. (These visual traumatics are underscored by an acoustic traumatics, which is expressed by pure noise: Lynch provides a 'closeup' of the sound of the penetration of the finger into the visceral realm. This hyper-obtrusive and shocking sound is—like the sound that accompanies the scene in which the camera enters the ear in *Blue Velvet*—what might be called the pure 'noise' of matter; the sound that Slavoj Žižek has described as the 'rumbling of the real'). In a comment about his one and only drug experience, Ballard provides the account of a similar experience:

What was frightening was: lying in bed, I thought of putting my hand on the top of my head, and suddenly I felt that the top of my head was missing—I'd plunged my fingers into my brain! In fact I suppose I had just touched my soft scalp, but—ugh! All those nightmares adults shouldn't need to endure—those are nightmares of childhood, aren't they? They didn't seem to have anything to do with an *adult* nightmare. I mean, *they were purely terrors of the nervous system, the flesh, of space and time.* Being alive at all is a nightmare—witness the new-born child's scream at the air. Terrifying. I never again took anything. (*Re/Search 24*, emphases added)

I. The Time(s) of Trauma

In Freud, the passage from the initial wounding event—what I will call the traumacore—to its psychopathological effects follows a strictly *temporal* logic. As Freud notes, although the earliest traumacores happen during childhood, their effects unfold "nur zum geringsten Maße zur Zeit, da sie vorfallen; weit bedeutsamer ist ihre nachträgliche Wirkung, die erst in späteren Perioden der Reifung eintreten kann" (*V* 31). The temporal logic proceeds from psychic imprints [*Eindrücke*] (the traumacore) through a temporal gap [*Intervall*] to the reproduction of these imprints. The reason for the fundamental enigmaticity of the traumacore—and it would be interesting to speculate on how Freud would have written if he had known of deconstruction—is that it happens too fast and is too violent to be registered in the mind: at the time of its occurrence it cannot be dealt with

psychically, [it is 'ohne Verständnis']; it is simply 'lived through' [*erlebt*].² Freud, in fact, saw the traumatic repetition compulsion as the attempt to create belatedly the anxiety that was missing in the first encounter.

The subsequent representations of the traumacore are somehow linked to the traces it has left. Some of the most interesting questions about the logic of trauma are related to this 'somehow' and they are situated at the interface of psychoanalysis and neurology: Where are the traces? How and where are they stored? In the architecture of the neuronal circuit? Or, as Freud thought (and recent research leans into this direction), in the paths of facilitations?



Mark Tansey, *Action Painting*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 36x78 in. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

According to the convoluted and by now well-known logic of belatedness or retrospection [*Nachträglichkeit*], the representation of the traumacore is in fact its 'first' occurrence. Inevitably, the traumacore 'will have been,' and although it is somehow visible, metaphorically, in its representations, it is only visible 'through a glass, darkly.' In fact, ultimately the systems of representations themselves function as the opaque, mostly oneiric screens that makes the traumacore both visible and, in doing so, invisible as well. The retrospection, or retroactivity operative in the

² See in this context floodings with stimuli [*Reizüberflutung*] that, even in later life, can shortcut the psychic apparatus and go directly to the level of the physical organism.

traumatic logic becomes especially visible in scenes in which it is put out of operation, as in Mark Tansey's painting *Action Painting I*, which shows the impossibility of an 'instant representation' of a car-crash: In Tansey's scenario, the temporal interval from the 'accident' to its representation is reduced to zero.

In the traumatic logic, the traumacore functions as an attractor; as a representational vacuum that is the cause for the compulsion to attempt to subsequently 'repeat' and 'relive' the event mnemonically, for instance through *memoires involontaires* that are caused by associative triggers (such as images, sounds, tastes, smells or touches). Like the navel of the dream, however, the traumacore ultimately eludes all of these memories. For my discussion, it is particularly important that, as Freud notes, there is a period of latency (which in Freud's cases often covers several years) between the event and its becoming 'traumatic': "in dem *Intervall* zwischen dem Erleben dieser Eindrücke und deren *Reproduktion* . . . hat nicht nur der somatische Sexualapparat sondern auch der psychische Apparat eine bedeutende Ausgestaltung erfahren" (*V* 31, emphases added).³ The psychic apparatus that 'will become' the subject develops biologically as well as mentally during the passage from the imprint to its representation and—this is merely another aspect of that fact—it remains constantly changing and in flux. Accordingly, the belated reproduction of the 'originary' event will inevitably be not only opaque but also distorted [*verdichtet, verschoben* and *entstellt*] and therefore subject to the workings of metaphor and metonymy.

³ In the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* Freud states: "We invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma *after the event*. The reason for this state of things is the retardation of puberty as compared with the remainder of the individual's development" (413), as well as "the very first traumas of all escape the ego entirely . . . *the retardation of puberty makes possible the occurrence of posthumous primary processes*" (416). See also: "this recollecting . . . follows a given thought-process in a reverse direction, as far back, it may be, as a perception . . . In pursuing this backward course, the process meets with intermediary links which have hitherto been unconscious, which have left no indications of quality behind them but whose indications of quality emerge *ex post facto*" (437).

A traumatic logic must think of the distortion of the event not as a secondary event that befalls a more ordinary representation but as a characteristic inherent in the very workings and structure of the subject's psychic apparatus. Also, it must take into account that the temporal 'difference' between the traumacore (which in itself is not 'yet' traumatic) and that of its effect (the trauma), which I have just treated in temporal terms, can also be read as the structural 'difference' between how the human being is organized on the level of the corporeal machine or the organism, and thus on the level of a predominantly physical organization (the 'metaphor' of this physical organization would be the skin, in its function of enveloping the organs and demarcating a certain volume and thus coherency of the single body) and the level of a predominantly psychic organization (the 'metaphor' of this psychic organization would be, following Anzieu's terminology, the 'skin-ego'; the agency that takes over the aforementioned physical functions of the skin on a psychic level). The interaction between these levels can again be considered from a diachronic angle (the development of the individual) as well as from a synchronic level (the simultaneous interaction of these levels within the individual at a specific time).

According to these characteristics, the question of a traumatics can not be so much how to retrieve the traumacore, as how to describe the subsequent traumatic organizations which develop when, during the history of the subject, specific traumata come to define a personalized 'trauma architecture.' Because there are many different levels, modes and degrees of traumatization, and, accordingly, different responses to it, it is difficult—and often dangerous—to generalize trauma. Invariably, the traumatic logic is coupled to very specific, individual circumstances. The temporal positions of individual traumata, for instance, fixate the trauma victim to specific temporal slots in its development—the personal traumatimes and the traumasites—to which it is bound to return. Again and again it will freeze, against its conscious will, (these returns follow a specific repetition compulsion [*Wiederholungszwang*]) into a terrified *tableau vivant*. A traumatics must thus address the complex folding onto each other of a violent event operating on an physically organized field (Deleuze calls this

'a plane of immanence') onto an psychically organized field (Deleuze calls this a 'plane of transcendence'): The folding onto each other of physical wounds onto psychic wounds.

So much for the temporal structure: But what about the relationship between the trauma, the visual realm and the realm of language? In Lacanian terms, the traumacore is situated at the border between the real (which I take, for the moment, to designate the field of the material organism) and the imaginary (the visual realm that is, in the history of the individual already in place *before* the instigation of the symbolic, which designates the realm of language). A classic example of the relationship between the trauma and visibility is the visual perception of the primal scene, whose 'violent' logic cannot be understood by the child, because at that time, it cannot yet 'read' the sexual matrix according to which the image is structured.⁴ If they occur after the subject's entry into the symbolic, the subsequent representations of the specific traumacore are related to the relative immediacy of the originary imaginary confrontation, but, according to the logic of retrospection, this time they imply a *return* to the imaginary from within the symbolic. As such, they recapitulate the structure of the dream, whose image architecture is also not purely visual, but rather 'structured like a rebus': The representation of the traumacore, which happens mostly 'in dreams,' consists of a renewed, and once more visual, experience of the 'original' scene. The (manifest) images that represent the (latent) scene, however, have become, during their detour through the symbolic, hieroglyphs.⁵ This translation from the purely visual to the sym-

⁴ As Žižek notes, "when the Wolf Man, at the age of two, witnessed the *coitus a tergo*, nothing traumatic marked the scene; the scene acquired traumatic features only in retrospect . . . when it became impossible to integrate the scene within the newly emerged horizon of narrativization—historicization—symbolization" (31). See also: "The moment we 'step out' in order to grasp the trauma as it is in itself and not through its distorted reflections within the symbolic space, the traumatic object evaporates into nothingness" (31-32).

⁵ Distorted versions of the primal scene—which are further implicated by the law of the considerations of representability [*Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*—are reviewed in dreams rather than in 'real—that is, conscious—life,' where they remain repressed and thus cannot be remembered: „Für eine besondere Art von überaus wichtigen Er-

bolized, and thus mediated visual designates the shift from a *special affect* (the purely imaginary image) to a *special effect* (the symbolic image as a hieroglyph).

What is so fascinating about the dream-image, in fact, is precisely that the images function as signifiers even while they retain their visual immediacy, because they are retranslations from the realm of signifiers into the visual realm. In terms of repression, this logic denotes the shift from the repression of (the trace of) an affect to the repression of a signifier. If perception—living through the event—is localized at the border between the real and the imaginary, therefore, the experience, and thus the representation of the event, is situated, in a regressive, belated trajectory, at the border between the imaginary and the symbolic.

'Images of the traumacore,' then, are literally '(im)possible' images. In analogy to the phantom pain sent out by the nerves about a missing limb, they are phantom images that are structurally excluded from but do not stop haunting representational space. Such images (and the question is in how far they can be thought of as images at all?) function as representational vacuums, as voids around which belated 'image architectures' are developed and positioned. The traumacore functions, therefore, an always already excluded, crossed out origin, such as the event of my own birth, and, as Lacan states, it is inevitably "by starting with the experience of the adult that we must grapple retrospectively, *nachträglich*, with the *supposedly original experiences*" (*Seminar I* 217, emphasis added).⁶

These characteristics of the logic of trauma lead directly to my definition of trauma for this particular event: Trauma is the effect of the

lebnissen, die in sehr frühe Zeiten der Kindheit fallen und seinerzeit *ohne Verständnis erlebt* worden sind, *nachträglich* aber *Verständnis und Deutung* gefunden haben, läßt sich eine Erinnerung meist nicht erwecken. Man gelangt durch Träume zu ihrer Kenntnis" (Freud, *Behandlungstechnik* 209, emphases added).

⁶ My argument about the logic of belatedness differs from many traumastudies in that it develops a traumatics from within a more general logic of belatedness rather than a specific belatedness from within a more general traumatics. Not only the trauma, but every feeling and experience is 'always already' caught within an "original intersubjectivity" (Lacan, *Seminar I* 217), a play of symbols and subjects in which subjects are symbols and symbols are subjects.

perception of a(n unplanned and undesirable), violent and sudden disorganization of an organized system in which the subject has a strong (in psychoanalytic terms narcissistic) investment. In this context, the term 'system'—which might be defined structurally as a number of organized machines that are coupled and enclosed by a coherent envelope—can designate an individual, a group or, in extension, a mechanical entity. Although it sounds somewhat technical, I am using the term to stress the amount of pre-given organization needed to 'effect' trauma. In most cases, this 'system' is simply the one that the subject calls 'me'—in these cases, in which the investment functions according to the laws of primary narcissism, the disorganization must of course be non-lethal (the trauma, after all, has to do with what happens 'after the event')—but it can also be a system in which the subject has a strong investment, such as a nation, a group or a friend. In this case—which operates according to the laws of a secondary narcissism—the event is often a lethal one.

II. The Site(s) of Trauma

Let me deal with the logic of the excluded origin and the (im)possibility to represent and to narrate the traumacore from within a different matrix: In his poem *De Rerum Natura*, the Roman philosopher and poet Lucretius describes the birth of the world as the beginning of atomic turbulence (and one should note that psychoanalytically the moment of birth might be seen as a first traumacore because it denotes the disruption of the union of mother and child and as such a separation into two separate biological systems). Before this moment of birth, there were only ordered atoms, falling eternally, and endlessly through a laminar, depthless void: "like raindrops in showers" (53). Suddenly, unexpectedly and for no particular reason, however, "at just about an instant uncertain and place likewise not set / They shift positions slightly veering off course" (53). If it had not been for this initial swerving, nothing would have come into existence: "So not careening they'd never *collide* nor would blows and buffets / Happen to atoms; thus, nature would not have created aught ever" (53, emphasis

added). Completely by accident, "at no fixed place or set instant" (55) a first atom "makes this slightest swerve" (55) and collides with another atom in a first crash of atoms. Lucretius calls this "smallest possible angle" that deviates from the straight line of the fall of the atoms through the laminar void the *clinamen*. The immediate result of the crash of atoms is, after a period of more and more crashes, an overall Brownian noise. Every subsequent organization—any process 'of spontaneous self-organization'—is based on and created from this initial state of *disorganization*.

To point out that at this first moment there is as yet no concept of order, and thus, by analogy, no concept of disorder, Michel Serres calls this state a state of 'pure multiplicity' (*Genesis* 111). While every attempt at establishing an order and a systematics is ultimately an attempt at recreating the always already lost, literally prenatal, and thus pretraumatic state of 'lamination,' every order is always based on—and reducible to—the state of Brownian multiplicity. (Dis)order, then, which denotes an unordered state of affairs as seen from within an ordered system—a state that Serres calls an "ordered multiplicity" (*Genesis* 111)—designates a return to Brownian motion.⁷

One might use two traffic images to denote the states of order and of multiplicity (a.k.a. disorder): imagine cars as automotive atoms. Either they are driving on a 'laminar' highway, or they are colliding in the *jouissance* of the Brownian chaos of, say, a scooterrink. As simulations of real

⁷ In a very complex figure of thought, Michel Serres differentiates between two modes of chaos. One is that of a laminar flux, an ordered chaos disturbed into unordered chaos: "L'écoulement laminaire, figure du chaos, est, à première vue, un schéma d'ordre . . . La turbulence parait introduire un désordre dans cet arrangement . . . Le désordre émerge de l'ordre" (*Naissance* 37). The other is its inverse, that of a Brownian *melée* out of whose initial disorder temporary and local orders emerge: "Or c'est l'inverse . . . plusieurs ordres émergent du désordre . . . Cela parait contradictoire . . . Ordre ou désordre, il est difficile d'en décider (37)." The first mode of chaos (the laminar emptiness of the flux, "le chaos-verseau, écoulement laminaire des éléments, flux parallèle dans le vide" (42) designates an (im)possible state before birth—that of the world, of the subject or of language—while the second (the Brownian disorder, "le chaos-nuage, masse désordonnée, fluctuante, brownienne" (42)) designates a chaotic state after birth; the atomic *melée* and the semantic background noise that rumbles 'below' any 'post-natal' creation of order.

car accidents, the latter collisions might in fact be considered as a sublime 'trauma practice' in the sense that they denote a confrontation with death 'from a safe distance.' In theatrically re-enacting car crashes, they share in the economy of the sublime confrontation, in which the position—either geographical or psychical—of the subject is highly important. It must be neither too near nor too far. The first, because an object that triggers terror and fright can only be experienced as sublime if the spectator is positioned at a safe distance from it, and thus not himself part of the tableau. As Kant states, "Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place" (120). On the other hand, if the spectator is too far away from the object, it ceases to be impressive and awesome enough to trigger the sublime. In order for the terror to be 'delicious,' the spectator has to be able to *feel* the power of nature and to *reflect* upon the power of reason over this very nature. The feeling must oscillate between "repulsion . . . and attraction" (115) and partake of both dissolution and solution. In the mapping of the logic of trauma and the logic of the sublime, then, the confrontation with the sublime can be read as 1. a *practice* of dealing with trauma, and 2. a simulation of trauma, and thus a way of 'doing trauma without the trauma.' The disturbing element in Ballard's novel *Crash*, in fact, is that he portrays at length transfers of simulations of car-crashes into real-life scenarios.

In their respective readings of Lucretius, Deleuze as well as Derrida stress in particular Lucretius' statement that the *clinamen* occurs "nec tempore certo" (at an indeterminate moment [Derrida 7]) and "nec regione loci certa" (in indeterminate places [7]). As it 'takes place' in "a smaller time than the minimum of continuous, thinkable time" (Deleuze 270) the *clinamen* designates an (im)possible origin in the sense that birth is also (im)possible: it "has always been present: [it is always already passed] it is not a secondary movement which would come accidentally to modify a vertical fall. It has always been present . . . The *clinamen* is the original determination of the direction of the movement of the atom" (269). If "It manifests . . . the irreducible plurality of causes or of causal series, and the impossibility of bringing causes together into a whole" (270), it also marks

an original multiplicity or *destinerring*—Derrida's term to designate the impossibility to return to an origin and thus, by extension, to return to the traumacore.

The *clinamen* also marks a 'fundamental chance' that is present in the world. As Ballard notes, "the fact that I am who I am is a gigantic accident. This is a paradox we *all* have to live with: each of us has a unique character and identity which is an enormous accident" (*Re/Search* 44). Already Aristotle had differentiated between the laws of *Chance and Necessity* in his *Physics*.⁸ Apart from this initial division, Aristotle further subdivides the realm of chance. Chance as it is related to specific human beings he calls *tyche*, which designates *personal* fortune, luck or accident. The other, more *general* kind of chance, which concerns the world at large and which is designated as contingency, he calls *automaton*. In modern terminology, the *automaton* designates the laws of probability, while the *tyche* designates the individual subject's meeting with these laws.

It is in this context that Lacan takes up Aristotle's terminology in his theory of the subject's forever missed, traumatic 'encounter with the real' (as the traumacore). He relates this missed meeting to the *tyche* and the *automaton* to the more general symbolic network of signifiers, which, as he argues in the appendices to "The Purloined Letter," is inherently probabilistic.

In relation to psychic space and time, the traumacore is, according to Lacan, an uncomputable, *tychic* event that cannot be integrated into the *automaton* of language. As he states in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*:

The function of the tuché [sic], of the real as an encounter—the encounter in so far as it may be missed—first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma (55).

⁸ "Thus to say that chance is a thing contrary to rule is correct" (197) and "chance is unstable" (Aristotle 197). Aristotle's still develops a physics of necessities. For a discussion of *tyche* and *automaton*, see Freeland and Judson.

Like the *clinamen*, the traumacore—ruled over by the blind chance designated by the *tychic*—happens 'nec regione loci certa nec tempore certo.' For Lacan, therefore, the *clinamen* can come to designate the moment of a primary trauma:

If development is entirely animated by *accident*, by the obstacle of the tuché, it is in so far as the tuché brings us back to the same point at which pre-Socratic philosophy sought to motivate the world itself. It required a *clinamen*, an inclination, at some point (*Fundamental Concepts* 63-64).

The infinitesimally small time of the *clinamen*, then, designates the time of the (im)possible traumacore. As Lucretius considers the atoms, in a very modern conceit, as letters [*lettera*]¹—this is the moment where atomism meets cybernetics—the *clinamen* can come to designate:

The birth of the world: the laminar atomic flux (the rain of atoms) is disrupted in the trauma of the *clinamen* [atomic *Reizüberflutung*]. This is the atom level and concerns the multiplicity of the machine of matter.

The subject's (im)possible birth: the unity of mother and child is disrupted in the trauma of birth. This is the organ level and concerns the multiplicity of the machine of the body.

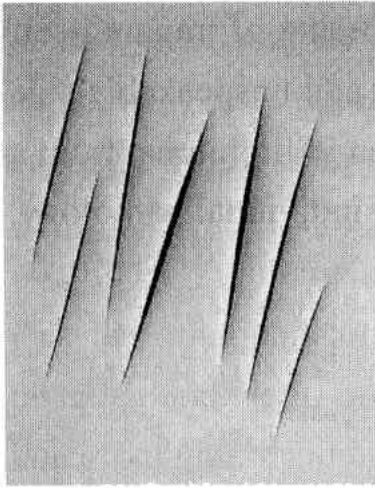
The subject's symbolic birth: the imaginary, phantasmatic unity is disrupted in the trauma of the entry into the signifier. This is the letter level and concerns the multiplicity of the machine of meaning.

Always caught simultaneously within these diverse registers, the trauma, in relation to the subject, operates in at least two directions: For the individual, (the system designated by the agencies of the ego and the subject respectively), a belated, traumatic return to moments of pure multiplicity as disorder (a.k.a. the Lacanian 'real') is experienced as a fragmentation and a descend into white, Brownian noise. From this position, the meeting with the *tyche* designates the 'missed' meeting with sudden disorder and the shocking dissolution that is implied by it. In this context, the ultimate model for the traumatic logic is the trauma of birth; the sudden, and always already having happened, fall from unity into shocking disorder [*Reizüberflutung*].

In a second trajectory, however, the fall into subjectivity, language, the law, culture, duality and thus into mediated and represented reality is itself traumatic. In fact, the entry into the realm presided over by the 'law of the signifier' re-capitulates the organism's birth in a breakup of the imaginary unity that Lacan designates symptomatically as the subject's second birth. This moment is marked by the fact that the imaginary ego receives 'the stroke of the letter': From the vision of unity created in the imaginary, man is expelled into the fundamentally broken symbolic. Especially this trajectory operative in the traumatic logic opens up the question of a traumatic *jouissance*, because there might be a desire to escape the symbolic in a return to a—now desirable—state of multiplicity. This trajectory is less related to what Lacan would designate as an impossible, purely corporeal *jouissance* than to that aspect of *jouissance* he calls the "*jouissance* of the Other." This *jouissance*, which is positioned between the imaginary and the real designates, as Nasio states, a transgressive "mirage" (47) of pure *jouissance*. The other aspects of *jouissance*, which seem to me to be less important in the context of a traumatic *jouissance* are the "phallic *jouissance*," which is situated between the real and the symbolic, and what Lacan calls *jouis-sens*, which is situated between the imaginary and the symbolic.⁹ A traumatic *jouissance*, I would maintain, is situated somewhere between the "*jouissance* of the Other" and Deleuze and Guattaris "desiring-machines" that fluctuate across the 'Body without Organs.'

From the moment of the entry into language onwards—and it is probably more of a (temporal) process than, as Lacan often seems to imply, a (logical) moment—consciousness functions as a barrier to the perception of pure multiplicity *and*, at the same time, as a barrier to the vision of unity. This double trajectory designates the moment when a trauma *in* representation meets the trauma *of* representation. Luigi Fontana's *Tagli* represent this representational traumatism—the stroke of the letter—directly. The surface of the representational screen itself is wounded, so

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the various aspects of *jouissance*, see Lacan *Le Séminaire XXII:RSI*.



Fontana, Lucio. *Concetto Spaziale Attese*, 1966.
 [http://www.centroarte.com/images/Fontanacon
 cettospazialeattese1966.jpg]

that the image denotes not so much the representation *of* the wound, but representation *as* the wound.

From the position of the traumatic symbolic, a return to multiplicity—otherwise marked as traumatic disorder—is no longer only what is feared and loathed (by the subject) it is also what is desired (but by whom? The purely material machine 'within' the subject? By the 'Body without Organs?'). This desire pervades 'the dream of consciousness about its absence.' If the trauma is understood as an onrush of stimulation or irritation, the ambiguity of the German word Freud uses in this context, 'Reiz,' which also means: lure, attraction, charm and temptation, implies that one side of the trauma is related to this, however painful and violent, *jouissance*.¹⁰

When Weiskel states in reference to "the second or traumatic phase of the negative sublime" that "the mind is overwhelmed, but because this state has been associated with gratification it is unconsciously and irresistibly attractive" (105), this attests to the fact that—at least during some phases of the confrontation with the sublime—the terror contains a kernel of *jouissance*: "there is simultaneously a wish to be inundated or engulfed by pleasurable stimuli and a fear of being incorporated, overwhelmed, an-

¹⁰ In these traumatic 'returns,' the first *clinamen* is by definition meaningless, as it is the first moment of coding. As the code develops only belatedly, the initial *clinamen* designates a blind spot in the subject's history. This is why history is forever incomplete: „L'histoire est au hasard, aléatoire et stochastique . . . L'effet capricieux d'une opération dépendant du hasard se trouve régularisé par une répétition suffisante de cette opération. L'histoire est la formation de syrrhèses, de systèmes, d'ordres, à partir de ce nuage qui ne cesse jamais. La reconnaissance et la description de ces émergences" (*Naissance* 202). The poetic potential and power of trauma and the *clinamen* lie in the fact that they function as a perspective point that causes the very failure of recollection and thus as the blind spot of language. The multiplicity of pure nature and life as a mixture of *automaton* and *tyche*—two systems that cannot be computed and predicted—rest on this 'blind' vacuum.

nihilated" (104). Such a *jouissance* can enter the suffering of trauma itself (and here the mapping is to do with the dark, violent and unspeakable side of *jouissance*) and it certainly enters the confrontation with trauma 'from a safe distance.' If the first aspect opens up the field of individual pathology, the second has to do with the 'pathologies of spectatorship.' Relating—rather than equating—trauma and *jouissance*, I do not maintain that suffering is fun, although a traumatic *jouissance* is all too often amalgamated with pain in psychopathologies all too well known and becoming more and more mainstream. Rather, I maintain that there is a certain attraction to and of trauma; an attraction that has to be acknowledged and which should not be repressed in discussions of a traumatic logic. As Jennifer Dumas states in the introduction to *Car Crashes* about the pathologies of spectatorship, "the question that eventually led to this book was, 'What brings us to stare with guilty fascination at photographs of death?'" (8).

To include the aspect of a traumatic *jouissance* into the logic of trauma might help to 'read' certain cultural products. What, for instance, to make of the amalgamation of trauma and *jouissance* that can be observed in some Mexican tabloids which are full of gory images of victims of car crashes (with a 'questionable' didactic text about the dangers of driving too fast or drunk) and, at the same time, show, in the very 'heart' of the journal, the invariable centerfold. Or, what to make of the traffic jams caused by spectators of car accidents? Maybe one can find something of the 'sublime logic' at work here, something of Kant's idea of an "augenblickliche Hemmung der Lebenskräfte und darauf sogleich folgenden desto stärkeren Ergießung derselben" (329).

The traumatics of representation is forgotten in many traumatics; especially those which dream of a complete detraumatization through the use of narration to fill in the traumatic blanks and to return to the initial trauma-site and traumetime, and from there, to come to terms with the disruptions that have been caused by them. Some classical movies recapitulate this desire, when they represent the traumacore at the end of the movie and thus provide a complete suture. Hitchcock's *Spellbound* but also lately *Color of Night*, whose only redeeming feature is that it concerns a traumatized psy-

choanalyst, both reconstruct the repressed traumatic scene within representation. Flashbacks, which are almost invariably suspended within a traumatic logic, return the victim to the original site, although Hitchcock



Still from *Spellbound*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Selznick. USA, 1945.

needs a Dali to image this return or to return this image. In these movies—to come back to the question of a fundamental chance—Derrida would maintain, psychoanalysis does indeed "find . . . itself" (*Postcard* 413) because it finds, in the return to the traumacore, its own primal scene.

The project of detraumatization, then, is often to dissolve the traumacore into the play of symbols, into narration and into a cultural context either during the subject's development—in the case of successful repression, of course, the trauma will never have been—or, if the repressed has returned and has come to haunt the subject, in an analysis.¹¹ The irony and the impossibility of a complete cancellation through a return is apparent, however, and already noted by Freud: *Even were the traumacore retrievable, through a reliving in a technicolor narrative (a successful general narrativization), this representation would, ironically, function as yet another trauma and turn into another traumacore. This is why a narrativization, even and especially if it were successful, would be inherently unsuccessful.* As Freud notes,¹² "die Aktivierung des Bildes, das nun dank

¹¹ In his book *Representing the Holocaust*, Dominick LaCapra has called the result of such attempts at a Hegelian sublation „fetishistic narratives" (220) whose aim is to make the illegible traumacore—which is not a text at all and which is only subsequently turned into a trauma text—readable by a narrative 'working-through.'

¹² ". . . dunkle Triebregungen, die das Kind nicht psychisch erfassen konnte zur Zeit, da sie vorfielen, die darum erst eine nachträgliche Interpretation erfahren haben und

der fortgeschrittenen intellektuellen Entwicklung verstanden werden kann, wirkt wie ein frisches Ereignis, aber auch wie ein neues Trauma" (*VIII* 220, emphasis added).¹³

III. The Topologies of Trauma

There are, then, at least three arguments against the project of a complete 'healing of the trauma by narrative' 1. the entry into representation is itself traumatic. 2. It is impossible to return to the original event by way of an always already metaphoric representation because of the temporality of belatedness that presides over the traumatic logic (Deleuze thinks the impossibility of returning to the origin as that between 'Difference and Repetition,' Lacan, in his *Seminar II*, as that between 'memory and remembrance') and 3: structurally, it is impossible to integrate the traumacore into a coherent, reasonable narrative because the traumacore is always, as Lacan had already noted, a chance event; a 'freak accident' that denies understanding and thus narrative closure. From these reasons the second is the probably most widely accepted one. The first is often neglected, while the third might sound to many readers as downright cynical. To maintain, however, that the traumacore is a 'freak accident' does not imply that, say, the holocaust has been a freak accident. Far from it. In fact, the holocaust is so exceptionally frightening because it left *nothing* to chance (neither genetically or politically) and was based on the most infernal planning and execution. What it means, rather, is that in its representations—and one of its characteristics is precisely that there is nothing but representations of it!—the lived-through traumacore is present(ed) as a chance event. To say

dann in der Analyse in Ausdrucksweisen auftreten, die ihnen ursprünglich gewiß nicht zukamen" (Freud *V* 286, emphasis added).

¹³ " . . . der im Traum vollzogene Fortschritt kann nicht festgehalten werden. Es kommt vielmehr durch einen Vorgang, den man nur einer *Verdrängung* gleichstellen kann, zur Ablehnung des Neuen und dessen Ersetzung durch eine Phobie." It is by looking at the female genital, for instance, that „die Kastrationsdrohung gelangt nachträglich zur Wirkung" (Freud *V* 247). In the case of the Wolf Man, his „letztes Sexualziel, die

this, however, calls for a precise definition of a chance event. Generally, a chance event is considered to be an unplanned and unforeseeable event (its 'other' is fate). From another angle, however, a chance event can be defined as the 'measure' of the inability of the subject to know everything about the structure and the dynamics of a specific system that it is a part of. No longer designating pure chaos, it is in this case seen as the marker of sudden disruptions in the architecture of a system that one cannot predict—and that are therefore 'seem to happen' suddenly—because one does not have the complete information about the system. As Michel Serres notes, "Der Zufall ist also in der Tat meine Unwissenheit" (*Hermes* 93).¹⁴

Seen in this light, to introduce chance into a discussion of trauma does not imply the erasure of ethics, and it does in no way excuse terror. In the case of man-made trauma, the event that will be experienced by somebody as a traumacore can be more or less planned, premeditated and amoral. From the position of the victim, however, who comes to suffer the event, it will still come as a surprise. In fact, this very surprise is one of the reasons (another one is the fact that it always comes as an 'overload' of stimulation) why the event is not directly present in the psychic system and comes to function as a 'ghost in the psychic machine': If the one side of the traumatic coin designates a sudden, uncomputable violence, the other side designates a reading of this sudden violence as 'chance.'

The fact that the very *escape* from the terror machine is experienced by survivors of the holocaust as a 'freak accident' is one indication of the presence of chance in the logic of trauma. In fact, the probably most

passive Einstellung zum Vater, war einer Verdrängung erlegen, die Angst vor dem Vater in Gestalt der Wolfsphobie an ihre Stelle getreten" (Freud *V* 164).

¹⁴ This ignorance is the result of the famous dictum from complexity theory that some systems are 'sensitively dependent on initial conditions.' See also: „Ja, das ist der letzte Schlag, der den menschlichen Narzißmus tiff, der Härteste in der ganzen Geschichte und der traumatischste. Die Hintergrundbotschaft ist nur ein Rauschen, und niemand gibt mir ein Zeichen, und es gibt kein Signal . . . Daß es nichts zu lesen gibt am Ende aller Lektüre, wer würde das ertragen?" (*Hermes* 89), and „Ohne Zweifel geht die Unwissenheit beim Würfeln auf unsere Unwissenheit zurück, auf die mangelnde Präzision unserer Bewegungen . . . vollkommene Präzision hinsichtlich der Anfangsbedingungen lässt sich nicht erreichen (90-91).

haunting element about the survival is the guilt the survivors feel about the fact of having survived 'for no reason at all' and very often, as Raymond Federman describes so vividly in *The Voice in the Closet* ("my survival a mistake he [another version or facet of 'Federman'] cannot accept") by pure chance.

The logic of chance pervading the logic of trauma is thus not opposed to the development of a traumatic ethics. In such traumatic ethics, however, one should always carefully differentiate between—and of course ultimately map onto each other—the ethics involved in producing man-made 'trauma machines' (holocausts, wars, drive-by shootings), the ethics of an accidental or natural traumatics (car crashes, the trauma of earthquakes or of tornados), and the ethics of the logic of trauma (the ethics of survival, of narrating, of witnessing and of listening).

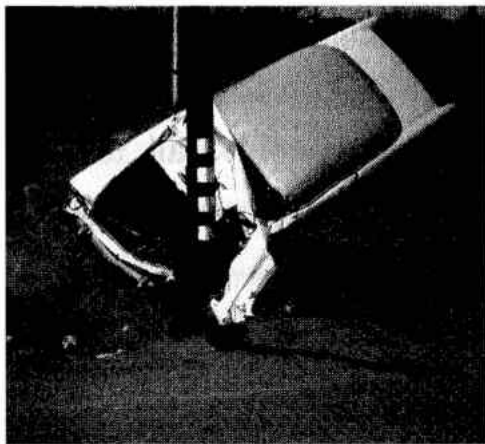
It is partly in order to come to a clearer understanding of the logic of trauma that I have chosen as my examples car crashes: It allows me to eclipse, at least partly, the complex implications of the ethics of man-made trauma machines. It also allows me to zoom in on an aspect of the logic of trauma that is for many reasons—not the least of which is the danger of being misunderstood—better treated in a 'clinical' fashion, as Ballard states in relationship to the a medical textbook *Crash Injuries*:

But there *are* moral dilemmas of a rather tricky kind. I think that to *find the truth* is the important thing. The fact is that the medical textbook *Crash Injuries* does tell the truth, because it's not primarily interested in the truth, in a sense. [The writer] is not interested in the effects; the damage to the human face or scalp or whatever is incidental; it's the *data he's after*. His emotions aren't aroused by the appalling injuries these people have suffered. He is simply analyzing, in a scientific way like a man in a lab, the comparisons between different vehicles, different accident modes or what have you. I think one's got to approach it in the same sort of spirit—trying to find the truth, which is often presented quite *incidentally*.
(*ReSearch* 20)

IV: Traumatic Narratology

Michael Kimmelman comments on the desire to 'overcome' chance in reference to Mell Kilpatrick's documentary photographs of car debris collected in the book *Car Crashes*. According to Kimmelman, we look at these documentaries in the attempt "to make sense of what can seem senseless" (Dumas 8).

In the final part of the essay I will deal with a number of representations of trauma—individual as well as collective—which all center around car crashes. All of them revolve around the attempt to 'make sense' and all of them contain some element of a 'traumatic *jouissance*.' Of course this is always a 'staged' *jouissance*, because art treats trauma as a metaphor, and it



Mell Kilpatrick., *Corona del Mar*, 1902-1962. Courtesy of Dumas Photo Archives.

spins psychic architectures around it that are highly artificial. In this light, a discussion of artistic representations of trauma should always be clearly separated from the experience of 'real trauma,' because it is one thing to talk about metaphors and quite another to experience the real thing. On the other hand, I have tried to show that from a structural point-of-view, even the real trauma (as opposed to the lived-through event of the traumacore) is always already a metaphor, and thus never the 'real

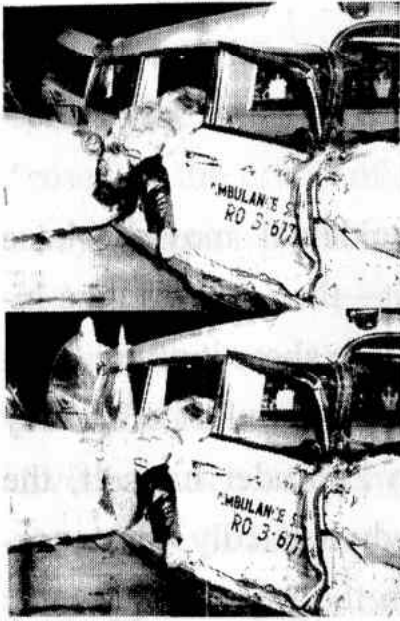
thing.' In this light, art is the metaphor of a metaphor, and it is as such that it might help to elucidate how the (im)possible real event is treated.

The '*jouissance* of trauma' lies at the center of John Hawkes' novel *Travesty*, which consists of the conversation the protagonist has in his car in which he travels with his two passengers: his daughter and the poet who is his daughter's as well as his wife's lover. The narrator's project is to drive with his passengers into a wall in what for him is a "geometrics of joy" (12); to implode order (design) and disorganization (debris) and thus to celebrate the truly poetic but also inherently traumatic *jouissance* of the

swift passage from one state of being to the other: "one moment the car in perfect condition, without so much as a scratch on its curving surface, the next moment impact, sheer impact. Total destruction. In its own way it is a form of ecstasy, this utter harmony between design and debris" (17). In his project, the protagonist is fully aware of the logic of trauma, although the traumatic event has many possible addressees: 1. the passengers, whose journey describes the time span from the traumatic realization of certain death until this very death, 2. the narrator's wife, and 3. the reader as a target outside of the text. In fact, the narrator mentions precisely the two aspects of trauma I have been discussing. As he tells his passengers, "we have agreed on the surface aspects of trauma: the difficulty of submission [a.k.a the *investment in order*], the problem of surprise [its *tychic* character]" (19). His ultimate aim is to transform the traumatic logic into an artistic one by bringing about a carefully planned traumatic accident, which means, of course, that it is no longer an accident—at least for the protagonist. For the passengers, of course, it is 'perfectly accidental' to find themselves where they are, because it is something they could not have foreseen. What the narrator has in mind, then, is a paradox—the very paradox of art, one might argue—"an accident . . . perfectly contrived" (23).¹⁵

All of my examples have been indications that many trauma images have to do with crashes and violent, sudden disorganizations of organized systems. That cars have often functioned as symbols of technological organization is a background that also pervades Warhol's fascination with car-crashes or the photographs—shockingly similar to Warhol's—collected in *Car Crashes*. Especially in this context, a further privileged site of trauma is the head, as the corporeal metaphor of mental organization. As a synaptic switchboard, it is the both personal as well as cultural metaphor for unity. The 'head of state,' for instance, that is staked against the inhe

¹⁵ For the protagonist, a trauma brought about consciously is 'of the essence' of art, because for both the traumatic logic and for art „nothing is more important than the existence of what does not exist" (*Travesty* 57).



Andy Warhol, *Ambulance Disaster*, 1963. © 2002 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Still from the Zapruder Film. © 1967 (1995) The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza. All Rights Reserved.

rently traumatic anarchy of what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'Body without Organs.' No wonder, then, that some of the most traumatic cultural images in 20th century American history (the space-shuttle crash would be another one) come from the Zapruder movie; the movie that shows how the head of state—and a person in whom many Americans had narcissistic investments—is blown apart in a car on the 22nd of November 1963 in Dallas. Unlike *Travesty*, which charts a personal trauma, Don DeLillo's novel *Libra* charts a cultural trauma and the traumatic relevance of an event that involves not only individuals but also individuals as members of a nation; a political and cultural 'system' with which they identify and into which they project themselves. On the 22nd of November, the film of reality runs along smoothly. Suddenly, however, ". . . at an indeterminate moment, in an indeterminate place . . ." a violent disruption that is too sudden and unexpected to be understood disrupts the idyll. As one woman in *Libra* realizes when she remembers the scene, the first shot is quite literally excluded from the representational field: "She didn't really hear the first noise until she heard the second" (397). Almost miraculously, however—

the date is actually a good date to mark the birth of media culture—the traumacore is banned on celluloid, directly, relentlessly, with the blood and the brain exploding literally through the image. The cultural icon of national unity is blown across the film and splatters against our understanding.

Does the film—especially because it is a 'coincidental' movie, whose representation has all the immediacy of a real event—then, provide the instant representation of the traumacore? Doesn't the film show it all, in 8mm technicolor? First of all, it is grainy, so that some details are lost in its very texture. Secondly, for all people except Abraham Zapruder himself, the filmic representation of the traumacore comes already belatedly. In a metaphor that evokes the psychic interval during which the psychic apparatus develops, the film has first to be developed to become representational (unlike a video or TV image, the filmic image is first latent). For most people, the first shock was surely a newsflash on the radio or on TV—a good test of the traumatic relevance of an event is if you can remember where you were when, say, John Lennon or Curt Cobain died. As Lou Reed remembers in his song *The day John Kennedy died*: "I was upstate in a bar, a team from the university was playing football on TV."

The Zapruder movie is thus already a belated representation of the traumacore, unlike the killing of Jack Ruby, which came to many people live and direct from TV-land, in real time, as a traumatic aftershock or tremor. Importantly, in the interval between the traumacore and the film, a whole machinery of explication had already set in. By then, it was a story that had to be assembled in (and out of) the image; a network of signifiers that had to be read. This desire for meaning would lead to the (im)possible image of secret assassins in the grains of the film and the onset of serious paranoia, which is, after all, nothing but the attempt to 'make sense' of the random and traumatic act of violence.

To show the multiplexity of the traumatic event, DeLillo zooms into it from various points of view, replaying the traumacore from a number of positions, as if the narration was itself caught in a curious sort of repetition compulsion and as if the event was too 'attractive' to be represented only

once. In all of these zooms, the ultimate focus is on the president's material brain (which, by the way, and symptomatically, is still missing, and DeLillo tells you why). When Kennedy rides into Dallas like a sun-god in a "brilliant" (393) Lincoln that "seemed to glow" (392) with Jackie holding "roses in the crook of her arm" (392), he is already, at least in deLillo's story, a fictional character: a belated Lincoln (one of the ironies of history is that he is actually riding in a Lincoln Continental) who rehearses or repeats, at least in DeLillo's reading, history, so that two cultural traumata are folded onto each other: "Here he was among them in a time of deep division, each army raging and Jack having hold of both" (393). At the same time, he is a tragic hero who carries messages of his own doom in his pocket: "For weeks he'd carried a scrap of paper with scribbled lines of some Shakespearean ruin. *They whirl! Asunder and dismember me*" (393). Minutes later, parts of this hero—see also one character's perception of how "the man's hair stood up. It just ripped and flew" (*Libra* 402)—end up on a cop who "turned his body right . . . and then the blood and matter, the unforgettable thing, the sleet of bone and blood and tissue struck him in the face . . . He kept his mouth closed tight so the fluid would not ooze in" (399). Other parts end up on the people in the car: "The third shot sent stuff just everywhere. Tissue, bone fragments, tissue in pale wads, watery mess, tissue, blood, brain matter all over them" (399). A woman has "bloodspray . . . and colorless stuff on her arms" (401). Agent Hill could "see right into the President's head" (402). And Jackie has put down the roses, stating "I have his brain in my hands" (399). A man in a white sweater "saw the stuff just erupt from the President's head." And finally there is Zapruder: "Someone with a movie camera stood on an abutment over there, aiming this way . . . A misty light around the President's head. Two pink-white jets of tissue rising from the mist. The movie camera running" (400). At this point, we are reading the movie in the text which functions as the basis of the text that we are reading.

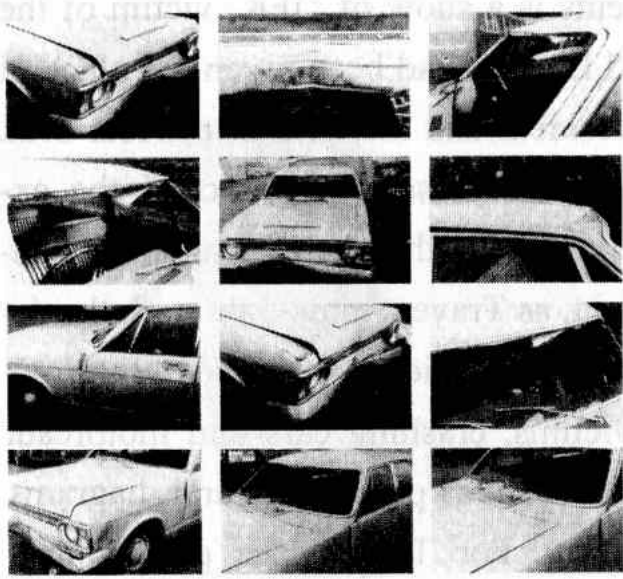
The subsequent story of the traumatized people and nation from just "sitting there . . . waiting for a voice to explain it" (397) to the death of Jack Ruby is the classic story of trying to make sense. As the narrator

comments, "only news could make them whole again . . . With a word they could begin to grid the world, make an instant surface that people can see and touch together" (414) and it is at the same time the story of the attempt at repression. Ironically, it is the 'organization' that knows most about this desire to forget "I'll tell you what people want. They want this Oswald to vanish . . . The people want a blank space where he's standing . . . People want to lose him" (430-1). This is why Ruby has, as one character says, to "turn him into a crowd."

In this context, the endless reruns of the images of Ruby killing Oswald is a curious case of cultural exorcism. An attempt at repression by reminding everybody of his death, in a desperate attempt to bury him once and for all. As someone in the novel notes "Why do they keep running it, over and over? Will it make Oswald go away forever if they show it a thousand times?" (446). Politically, the traumacore is of course immediately repressed in the logic of the formula 'the king is dead, long live the king,' which does not allow for a time of trauma.

Symptomatically, DeLillo's investigation into the 'unfolding event' of the assassination circles around the notions of chance and coincidence, which lie, as I have argued, at the core of the trauma. At the end of the book, the FBI agent whose task it is to make sense of the Kennedy murder comes to the inconclusive conclusion that "the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to *chance* . . . and what the weather was like" (441, emphasis added). In this, he echoes the American semiotician C. S. Peirce's demand for a general 'tychism' in history, as well as Michel Foucault's demand for a probabilistic and traumatic historiography, by almost 200 years: "We must accept the introduction of chance as a category in the production of events . . . the introduction, into the very roots of thought, of notions of *chance*, *discontinuity* and materiality" (231).

As Ballard notes, the assassination of JFK also presides over his novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* and "in many ways the book is directly inspired by his death and represents a desperate attempt to make sense of the tragedy, with its huge hidden agenda" (33). The other agenda is that, in Ballard's



From: Ballard, *Re/Search* 33.

own words "clearly, my younger self was hoping to understand his wife's meaningless death" (80). *The Atrocity Exhibition* is also related conceptually to Ballard's exhibition of crashed cars in London, and his own car-crash shortly after writing *Crash*, which was a nice case, as he says, of life imitating art. Still. It was a bad imitation, and in interviews Ballard does not stop apologizing for the apparent

'banality' of his personal crash geometrics (*Re/Search* 32-34).

For the protagonist of *The Atrocity Exhibition* "the motorcade assassination of JFK" is "the most extreme auto-disaster of our age" (47). The central character, split up into nine personae, attempts, in a series of "conceptual deaths" (13) and "conceptual auto-disasters" (17) to "kill Kennedy again, but *in a way that makes sense*" (37, emphasis added). As Ballard states in his belated notes to the novel, his project is to undo the trauma, "to make sense of these unhappy events and attribute to them a moral dimension and even, perhaps, a measure of hope. In Traven's mind, Kennedy and Monroe have 'died,' but not yet laid to rest" (62). Traven attempts to read the event in a geometrics of trauma, a collage aesthetics, in which objects and angles turn into "equations" (11) and "operating formulae" (11). The most important strategy for this investigation is a psycho-geometrical mapping, as in descriptions like "the descending triangle of the plaza was repeated in the facial geometry of the young woman" (19) or in the realization that "the Oedipus Complex resides today . . . in the styling of an automobile dashboard" (*Re/Search* 49). Through belated representations and re-enactments that supposedly unveil a hidden logic (a logic over which the God of the Crash-Test Dummies and relentless de-traumatizer, Ralph Nader, presides: "Every carcrash seemed a prayer to Ralph Nader" [19]) Traven attempts to come to the core of the event. In the context of

these attempts, one of his re-enactments is a show of "JFK, victim of the first conceptual car crash. A damaged Lincoln had been given the place of honour, plastic models of the late President and his wife in the rear seat. An elaborate attempt had been made to represent cosmetically the expressed brain tissue of the President" (21). Another staging samples Vietnam into the traumatic mix: "Each night, as Travers moved through the deserted auditorium, the films of simulated atrocities played above the rows of empty seats, images of napalm victims, crashing cars and motorcade attacks" (83). All of these collages are meant as psycho-cultural diagrams: images of psychic crashes and tremors. For Traven, the project must involve a geometrics of trauma, because he maintains that "the blitzkriegs will be fought out on the spinal battlefields, in terms of the postures we assume, of our traumas mimetized in the angle of a wall or balcony" (6).

The attempt is to discover below the surface event a more general cultural traumatics:

In the waking dream that now constitutes our reality [in a curious loop, real images are always already dream images], images of a blood-spattered widow, the chromium trim of a limousine windshield, the stylized glamour of a motorcade, fuse together to provide a secondary narrative with very different meanings. (99)

For Ballard, the event of Kennedy's death has traumatized everybody who has come in contact with it, and there is no escape from its impact:

Special Agent William R. Greer of the Secret Service was the driver of the Presidential limousine. One can't help wondering how the events in Dealey Plaza affected him. . . . The facilities exist for a complete neuro-psychiatric profile, though one will never be carried out. The results would be interesting, since we were all in a sense in the driver's seat on that day in Dallas. (25-6).

As for Hawkes, however, the trauma also holds the promise of *jouissance*. Curiously, the narrator notes that "the events in Dealey Plaza were unconsciously perceived as those of a massive multiple-sex auto-disaster, with consequent liberation of aggressive and polymorphously perverse drives. The role of Mrs. Kennedy, and of her stained clothing, requires no further analysis" (102). In fact, at the core of the trauma lies once more the image of a multiplex disorder (as well as its 'reverse side': a polymorphous perversity that Dali has captured very strikingly). The fascination of a



Salvador Dalí, *Bulgarian Child Eating a Rat*, 1939. © Demart pro Arte B. V./VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2002.

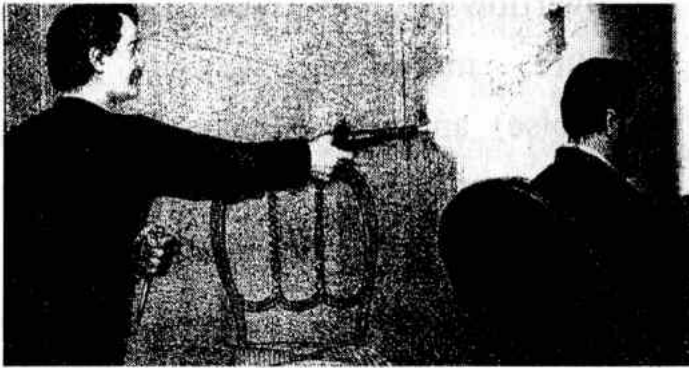
realm of pure, lived through sound and vision [*Reiz*], unscreened by the mind. It is in this context that the true poetics of trauma lie in an overflowing and overloading with pure, multiplex, chaotic sound (noise) and a pure, chaotic vision (light and color); in the artistic creation of a pure 'affect event':

the brain, which is in itself an incredibly elaborate structure—if you could only shine a light through the whole of it, *existence* would seem as bright as the sun! As shocking as a blast of sunlight, or a vast blare of noise . . . the brain colludes in a whole system of repressive mechanisms which it willingly accepts in order to make sense of its own identity and of the universe around it. . . . If you take too many of those shutters away—*boom!* But it's necessary to do it, all the same. (21)

Culturally, the question is thus not how to completely undo trauma, but how to navigate within an inherently traumatic field; how to organize trauma architectures into a workable machine and how to minimize trauma. As a character in Ballard's novel states, "the final destination of the 20th century, and the best we can hope for in the circumstances, is the attainment of a *moral and just psychopathology*" (15, emphasis added). It is in this light that one should also read Ballard's provocative comment that "needless to say, I believe that there should be more sex and violence on TV, not less. Both are powerful catalysts for change, in areas where change is urgent and overdue" (83).

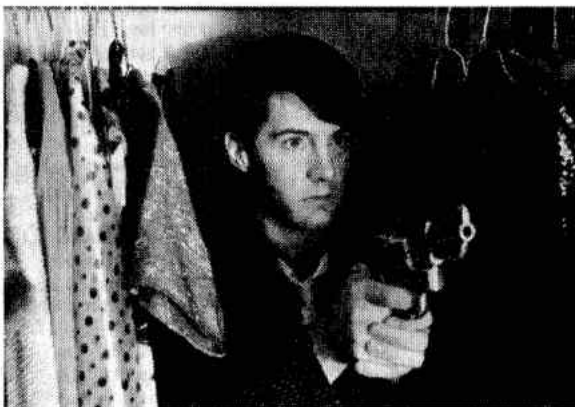
Finale

The movie *Blue Velvet* returns me to Lynch, and, via the assassination of Lincoln (who is 'present' in DeLillo through the car in which Kennedy rides) by John Wilkes Booth (who is 'present' in *Blue Velvet* as Frank Booth), to Kennedy. The movie describes how Booth, in the attempt to undo his own trauma—the oedipal violence looms large in his psychopathology—traumatizes everybody around him; in particular Dorothy



Assassination of Lincoln (contemporary print).
From: Plowden.

Vallens, whom he uses as a catalyst in his attempts to return to the pure, clean atmosphere of a pre-oedipal realm. The mask he is wearing during the moments of a hallucinated mother and child reunion symbolizes this clean atmosphere, while the piece of blue velvet—the film's true protagonist—functions as the medium around which he organizes his complex sexual economy. Throughout the movie, Booth's reign of terror, at whose center lie the repeated stagings of his '*tableaux vivants*' succeeds in cancelling out the 'paternal law' and the 'stroke of the letter.'



Still from *Blue Velvet*. Dir. David Lynch, USA 1986. From Fischer 132.

It is only at the very end of the movie, when Booth is shot by Gregory in a showdown during which Booth has the piece of blue velvet strapped around the barrel of his gun, that this letter—"a love letter straight from the heart"—arrives, after many detours that are figured by the many detours of the piece of blue velvet, at its final destination.

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ZSÓFIA BÁN

The Translation of Art: Reinterpreting the Work of Joseph Kosuth

. . . the matter of art is context. (Josef Kosuth)

I

In 1989, the year of momentous political change in Hungary, the time finally seemed ripe to organize the first Joseph Kosuth solo show in Budapest.¹ The political transition suddenly made possible the opening of a number of new art galleries, some of which were owned and run by foreigners, like the Viennese Hans Knoll in whose Budapest gallery the Kosuth show was presented. The timing turned out to be perfect—an instance of history in the service of art—, as concurrently with the exhibition in Budapest, Kosuth also had his big Wittgenstein exhibition (*The Play of the Unsayable*) on show in Vienna, which thus instantly and highly conveniently channeled the Budapest event into the larger context of the European and international art scene.

When I use the words 'the time finally seemed ripe' in reference to the Budapest show, it is more a linguistic cliché than the truth, as such an event was actually long overdue in Hungary, where Kosuth's works had had a highly significant influence on the local art scene from the mid-sixties on, an influence which only intensified in the period following 1968. 'Ripeness is all,' surely, except when politics thinks otherwise. However, the abrupt change in the political climate promptly precipitated the official reintegration of Kosuth into the Hungarian artistic and cultural tradition. This process culminated in 1993 at the Venice Biennial where the year's

¹ G. L./L. W., *Budapest*. The monograms in the title refer to Georg Lukács and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose texts Kosuth used in his installation.

central concept was the "Bridge" and accordingly, each nation exhibited the work of an artist whose influence on the given country's art scene was in some way crucially important. The Hungarian pavilion chose to invite the American concept artist Joseph Kosuth, a gesture that symbolically re-appropriated, liberated and, at the same time, officialized a highly important chapter in the history of Hungarian avant-garde, alternative art.² There were several reasons for this choice, beyond the fact that Kosuth's name bears a striking resemblance to that of Lajos Kossuth, the leader of the Hungarian revolution in 1848, who emigrated to America after the revolution was defeated. If the artist's name was deliberately assumed (as some suspect), it was a highly conscious choice on his part, one of the characteristics of Kosuth's work being that he often tends to (re)use texts originating from the cultural context of the Central-European region and written by often paradigmatic intellectual figures like Wittgenstein, Freud, Kafka, Musil, Benjamin or Svevo. (If, however, he *was* of Hungarian descent, moreover, a descendant of Kosuth, this orientation would offer itself naturally.) The other reason is that concept art as idea and language turned out to be a highly important influence in the East-Central European region from the sixties on, reinterpreted primarily as an effective mode of resistance to socialist realism, the official and enforced, dominant style in art at the time, and to the cult of objects and myths socialist realism entailed. Before, however, turning to the examination of the fault lines in the reception of Conceptual Art in Hungary, I would like to make a few general, preliminary remarks concerning Conceptual Art and the work of Kosuth. It is to be noted that such a comparative approach is an organic and strongly highlighted constituent of Kosuth's thought and artistic practice. Art as "production of meaning" and "art and culture as language" are ideas which obviously produce strikingly different results in different socio-cultural contexts and accordingly, Kosuth's work is highly sensitive to the problem of *context*, to the way art functions in relation to culture.

² It might be of interest to note that the American pavilion, in turn, exhibited the works of the grande dame of American/French art, Louise Bourgeois.

II

In his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" Sol LeWitt creates the slogan: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," and declares that art thus produced is "free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman" and that it does not provide the viewer with the "emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed" (Harrison 834). The conceptualist proposal of creating art through the investigation of language, as one among the various languages of art, deprives the viewer/reader of the said "emotional kick" primarily because, as G. H. Wright observes, "the subject-matter of conceptualist investigations is the *meaning* of certain words and expressions—and not the things and states of affairs themselves about which we talk, when using those words and expressions" (qtd. in Kosuth, *Art* 15-16).³ Hence, the—ideally—tautological and analytic quality of art exalted and demanded by Conceptualists prevents, to use Kosuth's words, one's being "flung out of art's 'orbit' into the 'infinite space' of the human condition" (*Art* 21) which, precisely, would be responsible for the sentimentalism and expressionism Concept Art was trying, at all cost, to avoid.

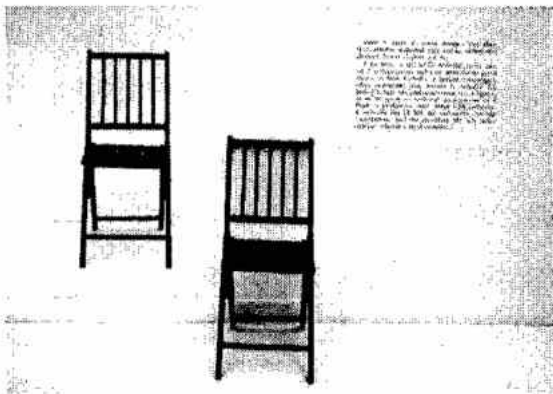
This was by no means a novel concern and certainly not one exclusively related to the field of art. Its presence was felt in all areas of modern thought, including literature and philosophy, both European and American. Wittgenstein—to name just one highly significant figure who, not incidentally, was a major influence on Conceptualists and principally on Kosuth—likewise placed at the center of his universe this desperate grappling with the laws and qualities of language. His oeuvre is commonly cited as a foremost illustration of the dramatic development, in one body of work, from a modernist gesture of propounding, as Jean-François Lyotard put it, "an absolute and pure language that speaks of the world," towards a—retrospectively—postmodern submission to a "plurality of tongues entangled in the world" (in Kosuth, *Art* xv).

³ I assume that meaning is used here according to Frege's distinction of *Sinn* and *Be-
deutung* ('meaning' and 'sense'—or, a third term later added by Austin—'reference').

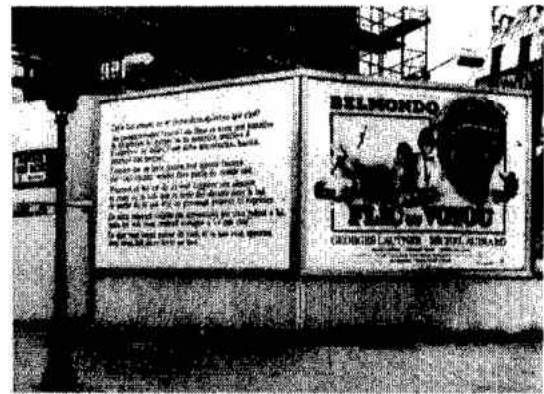
Kosuth's use of texts as art objects has frequently and fallaciously been related to concrete poetry, an assumption which invariably provokes indignation and despair in the artist. When asked if he saw any connection of his art to poetry his answer is:

Absolutely no relationship at all. It's simply one of things superficially resembling one other . . . the typical concrete poem makes the worst sort of superficial connections to work like mine because it's a kind of formalism of typography—it's cute with words, but dumb about language. It's becoming a simplistic and pseudo-avantgarde gimmick, like a new kind of paint. (*Art* 51-52)

What Kosuth is actually trying to do with these texts is to investigate the correlation between sign and idea (e.g. his *Titled, (Art as Idea as Idea), [water]* 1966), representation and idea (e.g. *One and Three Chairs* 1965), and the correlation between language and context, following the Wittgensteinian dictum: "The meaning is the use." The latter is eminently exemplified by Kosuth's 1979 series called *Text/Context* where he installed texts on billboards in various big cities all over the world, thus stressing the variability of meaning and function according to the place and culture in which the texts appear. They also offer a critique of the institution of advertising, for the texts, while pretending to be advertisements, are actually pseudo-advertisements, going against the dominance of traditional communicative functions in advertising. They have the *conative* (or *appellative*) function specific to the genre of advertisements, and they communi-



Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Kosuth, *Text/Context, Paris*, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.

cate *but with a difference*: what they communicate is a meta-artistic statement which refers the reader/spectator to problems of the nature of

language. Hence this strategy goes radically against the *referential function* of language.⁴

Concrete poetry, on the other hand, revolted against the 'transparency' of the word and stressed its visuality and materiality. It demanded that we actually *see* it, instead of just reading (looking through) it. In short, concrete poetry is about *words* (as things),⁵ whereas conceptualism, as practiced by Kosuth, is about *language* (as system and structure). According to the latter, meaning is to be reached through *structure*, a concept much indebted to Chomsky's generative grammar, which demonstrated that the meaning of a sentence can be grasped through its deep structure.⁶ "It's been thinking about language as a cultural system parallel to art," says Kosuth, "which makes it useful, both in theory and in practice" (*Art* 50). It is to be added that culture, by the same token, is interpreted by Kosuth as a linguistic system. This kind of approach to language (and art) precludes the idea of the local and stresses its diagrammatic nature,⁷ but also variability and pluralism. Thus, only the underlying structure can determine meaning. Similarly to the works of later, postmodern artists, Kosuth's works are *fig-*

⁴ See Jakobson's distinction of the six communicative functions (referential, emotive, poetic, conative, phatic, metalingual) in Sebeok.

⁵ Here I'd like to quote an observation from Steiner's *The Colors of Rhetoric*: "Semiotically, 'concrete art' is a contradiction in terms. Paintings and poems by definition are signs rather than things, except in the sense that ultimately a sign is a thing; a poem that is literally a tree or a rose is not a poem but that tree or rose. . . . Insofar as a poem is art, it cannot be totally concrete and we are thus in the presence of an extreme instance of Derridean *différance*" (197). What Steiner refers to as "Derridean *différance*," Eco has called "iconic fallacy" (191), referring to a fallacious collapsing of the sign and its object.

⁶ See Chomsky.

⁷ See Stein's essay 'Poetry and Grammar': "When you are at school and learn grammar grammar is very exciting. I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences. I suppose other things may be more exciting to others when they are at school but to me undoubtedly when I was at school the really completely exciting thing was diagramming sentences and that has been to me ever since the one thing that has been completely exciting and completely completing. I like the feeling *the everlasting feeling of sentences as they diagram themselves*" (314, my emphasis).

ural in the sense in which Lyotard uses the term, i.e. by *blocking out* heterogeneous elements, like the textual and the visual, they make us realize that there is something there (or, as Robert Frost would put it: "something there is . . .") that cannot be represented and which creates tension. However, this tension or supercondensed quality of such works is not created by exterior prohibition, but is encoded into the language of the work itself; it springs, as it were, from its very nature.

III

Not incidentally, this is the point where I would like to turn to the reception of Kosuth's work and Conceptual Art in Hungary, and to the examination of its local variants, since in the case of Hungarian conceptual art the tension referred to above very often originated precisely from the kind of exterior prohibition that was said to be lacking from American conceptual works and more specifically from those of Kosuth. The exterior prohibition, in this case, consisted in political and artistic censorship, as a consequence of which Hungarian conceptual art did not have the liberty to be as purely tautological, analytic and self-referential as—ideally—its American counterpart was. This is the reason why in Hungary 'koncept' or 'idea' art, often bearing strongly political and local overtones, was always much more popular than Kosuth's pure conceptual art whose primary aim was to question and change the structure, function and meaning of art. However, in the period after 1968, and especially in the beginning of the 70's, Kosuth's radicalism proved to be a revelation and, in a certain sense, a liberation for Hungarian avant-garde artists. The basic proposition of Kosuth's work (and conceptual art in general)—that it is possible for a work of art to be constituted exclusively of words and thoughts, and what the artist makes are mere models, whereas the actual works of art are ideas⁸—seemed like anathema from the perspective of socialist realist art and official art criticism, which was equally hostile to abstract art and con-

⁸ A situation which makes it somewhat difficult to prohibit works of art and which, at the same time, enhances their transportability.

ceptualism for their being "hopelessly" alienated from the representation of "reality." Moreover, and this was perhaps even more serious a crime, Conceptual Art also proclaimed that the mediating role of art criticism was no longer necessary, it being a role that could be better fulfilled by the artists themselves. This idea was obviously intolerable in a political context where art critics were expected to support and propagate the official tenets and policies of the state concerning artistic practice. The art world (as well as the literary world) was then monitored according to the categories of the infamous "three T's," i.e. prohibited (*tiltott*), tolerated (*tűrt*) and promoted (*támogatott*) art, under which avant-garde art survived somewhere in limbo, in the twilight zone dividing the categories of prohibited and tolerated (which of course does not mean that certain works and exhibitions were not promptly prohibited).

The aftermath of 1968 brought along a certain loosening of these directives concerning aesthetic principles, even if this date had a fundamentally different meaning for those living in the Eastern bloc. For Hungarians it meant, among other things, the contribution of our government to the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the suppression of their short-lived revolt against Soviet dominance, and thus it had very different overtones from those of the revolts in the West because it was not guided by Leftist ideals, but much rather by a general desire for freedom, regardless of party politics. Many contemporary conceptual works were direct, if subtle comments on these events, like Tamás Szentjóby's "Chechoslovakian radio" from 1968, which is a brick in the shape of a portable transistor radio popular in those times, but which transmits no news other than its presence—it's 'just another brick in the wall.' The object also has further political connotations, as in Hungarian 'brick' is slang for 'informer' [stool pidgeon], thus suggesting that instead of informing people, the manipulated media control and inform on them.

In spite of being strongly influenced and inspired by the sterile, analytic and self-reflexive quality of Western conceptual art, its Hungarian (and Eastern) counterpart was always, inevitably, imbued with political content, even when operating with pure forms, which choice itself was a statement

against official requirements in the aesthetic domain. The use of objects, although obviously inspired by the Duchampian concept of the ready-made, was always, at the same time, a critique of the official cult of certain objects, symbols or historic events and figures (e.g. Dóra Maurer's *Let's Look for Dózsa!*, 1972). Maurer wrote the following about this work:

1972, for a graphic exhibition devoted to Dózsa⁹ I prepared a segmented, movable serial portrait with the following slogan: 'Let's look for Dózsa!' No authentic portraits are left to us, only imaginary ones. Let us further investigate what Dózsa must have looked like. I drew eight faces with different expressions after photographs of anthropologically Transylvanian type of men. Then I cut them into strips and mixed them: new faces can be produced by pushing the strips. (Körner 204)

Some examples of recurring objects and symbols are: red star, hammer and sickle, the Hungarian flag, cobblestone, etc. The use of such objects often turned Hungarian conceptual art into a strongly conceptualized version of



Miklós Eldély, *The Snows of Yesteryear?*, 1970. Courtesy of Annamária Szőke.

Pop Art. Another, earlier example by Szentjóby is *Cooling Water* from 1965, seemingly just an objectified representation of a physical process, but which, for those "who knew," was an obvious comment on contemporary politics, as was *New Unit of Measurement* from 1969, a 60 cm long rod which can be regarded as an object in and of itself, but given the date of its birth (one year after '68) and its subtitle: "to the memory of the first walk on the moon," it points to plural, ambiguous meanings beyond itself. The same is true of a work by

Miklós Erdély (*The Snows of Yesteryear?* 1970),—perhaps the only Hungarian conceptual artist par excellence, regarded as master and mentor by younger artists—whose works were greatly inspired by the antinomies of ancient Greek philosophy and by the texts of the Bible for their ambiguous, plural meanings and interpretations. Erdély's unique position as the

only 'true' concept artist is typical of the Hungarian scene because contrary to the very well-defined role and territory of Concept Art in the Western—and especially the American and British—art scene, in Hungary basically *all* segments of art (among them poetry, film, theater, music, etc.) were imbued with the effects of conceptualism, which greatly influenced their grappling with problems of their respective genres, besides offering them an alternative language in which to express themselves.

The form of Hungarian conceptual art illustrated above was referred to as *projekt art* as the concept involved usually referred to a project, a process whose demonstration was often linked to objects. Another typical strand was called *play art* whose main representative was István Haraszty (originally a metalworker) who constructed complex, absurd machines which combined the rationalism and teleology of machinery with the irrationalism and uselessness of the systems they represented (see e.g. *Like a Bird* from 1971, a cage with a live bird accompanied by the following description:

The electronic system keeps the position and movements of the bird under control in the enclosed space. Its steps in the cage are signaled and controlled by numbers. When the bird sits on the red-and-black resting rod, the door of the cage opens. When it approaches the exit, the magnetic field ceases and the door closes again.)

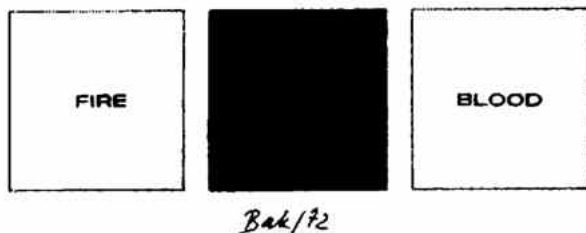
Compared to such practically 'realist' or 'narrative-descriptive' works, the absurdity of the political system represented is even more powerfully highlighted by such works as *Fig Stone Remover* from 1969, another sizable, complex machine capable of realizing useless tasks which, besides its local, political subtext, can also be regarded as a general, anarcho-Dadaist comment on *all* structures and *all* systems.

Foremost among these questioned structures was language itself which, contaminated by the effects of constant ideologizing, had lost its original meaning and referentiality. Hence, it was no mere coincidence that conceptual art in Hungary started to evolve towards the end of the sixties and early seventies parallel with the flourishing of semiotics, the scientific

⁹ Leader of a peasant revolt in 16th century Hungary.

study of signs and symbols, a discipline which seemed to offer a way out of the severe communication crisis people found themselves entrapped in thanks to the machinations of politics.¹⁰ Thus, while American Concept Art was attempting to locate the extreme limits of the language of art, its Hungarian counterpart, while profiting greatly from the results of these investigations, was aimed much more at probing the momentary limits of avant-garde art and thought in Hungary, and of language in general.¹¹ The conceptual investigations of Concept Art aimed at mapping the domain of art and, based on the analytic procedures of logic and linguistics as put forward by Kosuth in his groundbreaking study "Art After Philosophy" (1969), were thus applied in the context of Hungarian art in order to reflect upon the workings of *reality*. Hence, ironically, it was much more *essentially* realist than was convenient for those who denounced it for lacking pictorial realism. Often, the works of Hungarian conceptual artists were not just a critique of politically-ideologically debased language, as in the works of Imre Bak (*The Rising of Good and Bad*, 1972; *Three Red Squares*, 1972) or Tibor Gáyor (*Texts*, 1972/3), but they were

THREE RED SQUARES



Imre Bak, *Three Red Squares*, 1972. Courtesy of the artist.

also a critique of representation as such (as in Gyula Pauer's *Statue of Liberty*, 1973), but obviously not for the same reasons as in American Concept Art. Pauer's *Pseudo*-series is another variation on the same theme (e.g. *Red Pseudo Cube*,

¹⁰ Not incidentally, certain linguistic seminars (like e.g. those offered by János Zsilka) at the Faculty of Arts in Budapest became a regular meeting place for students who were searching for intellectual alternatives, many of whom later became avant-garde, non-conformist artists, writers and thinkers.

¹¹ It must be noted here that besides conceptual art, hiper-realism was the genre most often used by avant-garde artists in Hungary for the purpose of political commentary (as e.g. the hyper-realist re-painting of well-known socialist realist works resulting in ambivalent content and message that hopelessly confused critics and censors alike).

1971 which—as the original but prohibited project's description stated—was supposed to represent a cube whose surface is seemingly rough and uneven, but which, seen through a pair of red (perhaps star-shaped) glasses, smoothens out, as if by magic.

Finally, János Major's series of tombstone photos is a typical expression of the Hungarian avant-garde's biting self-criticism and desperately morbid humor which helped the spirit of dissent survive in even the most unfavorable times. His 1968 photo taken of a real tombstone bearing the inscription 'Lajos Kubista' (Cubist, in Hungarian) is a visual expression of his pessimistic views concerning the situation of the avant-garde in Hungary. In a text accompanying this work his main conclusions are that many great minds were born in Hungary who were, however, forced to realize their great ideas abroad; and great ideas were born abroad which came to Budapest to die—thus Budapest is a huge necropolis of ideas. A later work by Major represents the pedestal of the Lajos Kossuth mausoleum (*Kosuth*, 1972) of which the artist wrote the following: "I wished to pay tribute to Kosuth's concept art in such a way as to suggest what I have already suggested in my photos of other tombstones, namely that I think the survival of living ideas is utterly hopeless here" (Körner 200). From the vantage point of the present however, it is easy to be more optimistic and to see, if only in retrospect, that ideas function much like energy, that is, they are never lost but merely transformed—or translated into another language.

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Transgressive Visions: Bodies and Boundaries

SUSANNE VON FALKENHAUSEN

The Body of Abstraction: The Politics of Visual Representation in Postwar American Art

The "body of abstraction" seems to be a contradiction in terms: ever since the early avant-garde, abstraction in the visual arts has been conceptualized as opposing the illusionistic representation of the human body in traditional Western art.

Since the beginning of abstract painting, the concept of visual representation has been contested by the unfailing desire of avant-garde artists to do without the image of "something," be it a human figure, a landscape, or an object of any kind, in short, to do without the mimesis of something supposedly real in artistic practice. The desire of the artist seemed to search fulfilment in the opposite of representation, in the "pure presence" of the artistic object.

Several different attempts have been made to satisfy this desire for immediacy and presence instead of symbolic and technical mediation in the field of visual art. The most radical among these took place largely in the United States, from Jackson Pollock's drip-painting to minimalism and object-art and, most recently performance.¹ In the end, none of these practices offered real solutions to the problem—representation as a mark of distance between presence and signification ultimately found its way back into art. One of the problems was that the artists could not control the way their art was perceived, or "read." Duchamp had already noted this problem: coming to the conclusion that the spectator is integral to the art itself, Duchamp tried to place a urinal, signed "R. Mutt," in an art show in 1917

¹ In my argument I produce a kind of short circuit between the problems of presence and of bodily representation versus abstraction. It would be interesting to include a closer look at the works of artists like Linda Benglis or Carolee Schneemann, who

under the Title "Fountain," thus marking the tension between the artist's author-function and the position of the spectator.

The oppositional tendencies in art, between the image of the body and painterly abstraction, were reinforced in the Cold War, when they were conceived as part of a "*Kulturkampf*" between "socialist humanism" and "decadent, consumerist capitalism."

In the following essay, I want to trace some aspects of the strange history of this binarism in the realm of modernist painting. The opposition seems to spring from two conflicting desires: on the one hand, there is the desire of certain artists to arrive at some kind of presence beyond codification, symbolization, or narration, which on the other hand led to a questioning of the author-function. Was the author to be erased, fragmented or liquefied in the artistic practices that refused representation in the name of presence (Artaud, Ivonne Rainer) or was it even magnified by the mystique of artistic desire, as could be argued for some practices of performance (Nitsch, Mühl)? The desire for narrative in art seemed to persist. It can certainly be found within a wider public, but not only there, since the discussion of figuration which seems to offer narrative readings, and the perception that abstraction forecloses such readings, still persist today.

One might think that the nomadic strategies of the postmodern, which have abolished the hierarchies of a humanistic representation of values (along with its corresponding narratives) as well as the myths of abstract modernism, could feel free to mix figuration and abstraction. However, strangely enough, even here the binary confrontation between the representation of corporeality and abstraction does not seem to have been solved. In a review of the recent Jackson Pollock retrospective at the MOMA, the critic Michael Leja attempts to reinvent the artist for a post-formalistic, postmodernist public; he argues for the re-recognition of signs of the figurative in Pollock's paintings in order to counter totalizing descriptions of size, all-over, horizontality and optical experience by rediscovering the role of the figurative (39). But the public already had experi-

reacted to the Pollock-myth with a performance called *Up To And Including Her Limits* in 1976, combining performative presence with the pictorial sign.

ence with postmodern trends like Appropriation Art and Abject Art, which seem to have made the distinction between abstraction and figuration irrelevant in terms of artistic strategies. So why should it be important to read the key figure of American abstract painting, Jackson Pollock, into the genealogy of postmodernism by valorizing figurative elements in his paintings? Does this operation not lend the image of the body a kind of latent ontological status?

Considering some tropes in the figurative versus abstract debate, and the ways in which abstract art was represented in the post-war media, it seems to me that the more art tried to be non-representational, to break out of what artists may have experienced as the coercion of signification, the more a counter-reaction emerged within its interpreters, i.e. within the public, which tried to re-inscribe some kind of narrative into the art-object.

Apparently narratives that are coupled with artistic practice create linkages to the symbolic construction of identities and to cultural practices that take place within fields determined by socio-political definitions and hegemonies.

In the European visual arts, the legibility of art as representation was defined for centuries by images of the—human—body in a particular environment.² Narrative and meaning were generated through this representational technique, without which post-Renaissance art would have been unimaginable. Conversely, the non-figurative art of the avant-garde was formulated by both artists and theoreticians in contradistinction to these categories. For these artists, the picture was primarily surface. The perspectival space populated by human figures, which as a rule was ordered around a narrative center, came to be replaced by the surface-oriented structures of abstract painting; at the end of the 1940s this process reached a formal climax in what the influential American critic and art historian

² In contrast to both Anglo-American and French art history, German art history does not have an equivalent for the term 'representation,' which in turn makes a productive reception of certain work, like, for instance, Jonathan Crary's book *Techniques of the Observer*, difficult. I am convinced that 'representation' is a useful term and should be introduced into German art history.

Clement Greenberg termed the "all-over." This artistic structure was first introduced in the first decade of the century by Mondrian, who still composed his "all-overs" with a geometrical order, and by using the traditional techniques of easel painting. Pollock took this a step further, by placing his canvas on the floor. Greenberg also described the consequences of this structure for the relationship between observer, space and image.

The picture has now become an entity belonging to the same order of space as our bodies; it is no longer the vehicle of an imagined equivalent of that order. Pictorial space has lost its 'inside' and become all 'outside'. The spectator can no longer escape into it from the space in which he himself stands. (*Abstract* 136-137)

Instead, the observer is forced to perceive these all-over surfaces as a single field, in which there is no differentiation between figure and ground, center and margin. These paintings cannot be understood as transparent surfaces, through which one can see a world that can be imagined as real, and in this sense, depicted in the picture; rather, these paintings confront their observer as opaque surfaces. The dismantling of these categories, however, brought the relationship of the visual arts to the production of meaning and legibility into such a state of crisis, that the discussion about the forms of artistic modernism were always already political. This is especially evident in the bitter controversies over formalism and realism—which began in the 1920s, only to reemerge after 1945 in the context of the Cold War. In 1949, *Life* Magazine published an article entitled: "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?," together with a photograph of the painter standing in front of *Summertime*. (Varnedoe/Karmel 59). Although the attitude of the authors was ambivalent, this article represents the beginning of the Pollock myth, combining illegible painting (*Time* called him "Jack the Dripper;" one critic was reminded by his paintings of "a mop of tangled hair I have an irresistible urge to comb out"³) with the image of the—not yet—great artist. Any ambiguities in the evaluation of Pollock's drip pictures seem to have already been forgotten by March 1951, when *Vogue* published a color fashion-photo by Cecil

³ Emily Genauer qtd. in Varnedoe/Karmel 323.



"Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" *Life*, 8 August 1949. © Time Inc. From: Philipps, 32.

Beaton. This photo, taken at Pollock's Betty Parsons exhibition in 1950, showed a fashion model poised in front of Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*. In the same year Hans Namuth took his famous black-and-white photographs of Pollock in the act of painting *Autumn Rhythm*. The two photos have certain elements in common: first, both display the same painting, *Autumn Rhythm*; once while being painted, once as it was presented in the gallery. Both photographs illustrate a painted canvas and a human figure. But they also share two additional invisible aspects: first, both have attained the status of cult photos in the art world, comparable to images of Marilyn Monroe. Second: they both operate within discursive fields in the art-system; however, as I will demonstrate, it is here that the differences begin; these two photographs worked to corroborate two conflicting narratives. The distinguishing characteristics of these narratives can be located in the two depicted bodies, that of the fashion model (not of the painter's model!) and that of the painter. It is these bodies, when seen together with the painting depicted in both photos, that make these photographs elements of a myth production, i.e. make them legible in this sense.



Cecil Beaton, *Model in front of Autumn Rhythm*, for *Vogue*, March 1951. Courtesy of Sootherby's London. From: Guilbaut, Cover.



Hans Namuth, *Jackson Pollock ca. 1950*. © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate, Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona. From: Harten.

Using long term exposure, Hans Namuth "catches"—such a nice metaphor—the artist, with a leg spread out, precariously balanced, and a can of paint in his left hand, as he is just pulling a stick from the paint, and swings it over the picture in one extended motion. We can see hanging on the wall behind him—as far as I can tell—*Number 31*, a 1950 painting now at the Museum of Modern Art. The use of black and white here has the same effect as Beaton's use of color: since Pollock's jeans and T-shirt offer no color contrast to the canvas, body and painting represent unbounded zones that one can barely differentiate. In Beaton's photo, this manifests itself in the soft harmony of colors between the pink and black in the painting and on the dress, and, crucially, between the model's blonde hair and the yellow tones of the painting. Here we have discovered yet another similarity, if not a surprising one: although this is accomplished by using different techniques, both photographs produce the effect in the viewer that body and painting partially merge in the photographic image, that the space between the two disappears.

Bound together in the unified space of the photograph, the bodies of painter and model and the painting that constitutes the contour of their narrative space form the basis for the construction of a narrative that can explain what otherwise represented a vexing problem for both critic and public: Pollock's abstract drip paintings suggest a more legible dimension in the particular media condition of photography.

Which narratives can be linked to these constellations of body images and all-over painting? What myths are rendered in these photos? Although we are dealing with the same painting in both photographs, is it one and the same Pollock myth in both images? How does the merging of the painting with the female model in the one photo, and with the masculine body of the painter in the other affect their operation? Let us begin with Namuth's photo: it tells the myth of the art hero that was newly formed after 1945. Pollock himself offered the preconditions for the formulation of this epic. As Pollock said in an oft-quoted interview from 1947, "When I am in my Painting, I 'm not aware of what I 'm doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about" (Pollock 79). The artist, who is *in* the image, who has *no* control, the *ersatz* hero, replacing the old-fashioned male artist subject. The older form of artistic subjectivity, with a controlling gaze, controls the image from "outside," as an object, from the position of the observer, a position which in turn is produced by the focal point of the picture's construction of a narrative space. The positions of the observer and the imaginary location of the artist unite in front of the image, and, consequently, their respective statuses as subject as well, which are continuously reconfirmed from the position of production and reception. The artist is present as the intellectual inventor of the image, which in turn represents his capacity for invention. The body of the artist has no function in this older construction.

Pollock's description of being "in the image" not only eliminates the older model of the construction of the artist as subject before the image: It also corresponds to a painterly strategy which dissolves the observer's position before the image, fixed by the narrative space of the image. But it is no coincidence that now the body of the artist, or rather, the photographic

image of his body in the act of painting, provides a central element of a new mythic narrative of creative genius. While the artist negates the author-function, by eliminating its position before the image and in the image, Namuth's photos reinstall this function, through an image of the painterly act of the artist, indeed through an image of the artists' body in action. Similarly to later performance art, the only thing that remains of the artistic act as a presence of agency only is this photo that depicts it, and, as with performance art, the body of the artist takes center stage in this narrative of artistic creation. In his 1952 text, "American Action Painting," Harold Rosenberg provided the art critic's version of this discourse that had been made visible to a wider public a year before in the publication of the Namuth photos, using this construction to give a trademark to an entire trend of artistic production—"action painting." Not coincidentally, the happening artist Alan Kaprow, who refers to Namuth's photos, saw himself as the heir to a Pollock whom Kaprow regarded as performative. However, one should also add that it was precisely these photographs that first made Pollock's version of abstract painting accessible, narratable for a wider audience, since it reintroduced the artist-subject just when the anti-narrative painting seemed to eliminate it.

According to Clement Greenberg, Pollock's painting emphasizes pure painting, without figuration, without producing a mimetic appearance, without referentiality, therefore without representation.⁴ Pure painting is thus pure presence, pure self-reference. Representation seen as coercion thus seems to be eliminated. Painting becomes an act free of denotation, which, and this is a problem, allows itself to be seen not in the act, but only in the product. It is here, in the self-imposed asceticism of the limitations to a rectangular surface and painterly markings without reference, where the so often lamented rupture between presence and representation is again established. This rupture can only be denied in some kind of metaphysics of the artistic act, but not in an ontologization of the image as its product.

⁴ See, for example, Greenberg, *Amerikanische Malerei*.



Dejneka, Alexandr Alexandrowitsch, *Defence of Sevastopol*, 1942, Oil on Canvas, 200x400cm, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. From: Hubertus 204.

The Cold War provided Pollock's drip painting with a superstructure of meaning, which transformed the painterly traces of the artistic act into signifiers of freedom—they became an aesthetic weapon in the Cold War against the "socialist happiness" of Stalinist painting, which took on its full form in that period.⁵ In Namuth's photos

the body of the art hero in the photograph compensates for his absence in the painting. In the modern heroic epic of abstract expressionist artistic creativity, the artist's body for the first time becomes important because it is incorporated in the process of production. This process at the same time requires, as the photo illustrates, a full bodily engagement, and if we consider the monumental format of the paintings produced in this way, indeed takes on heroic, epic proportions. In the drippings, which according to Richard Schiff are indexical signs, that is, traces of this process, the artist's body finds itself represented as the physical point of art's emergence.⁶ Namuth's photograph perfectly combines all the elements of this myth: the dissolution of the artist body in a process of movement, the splashes of light on the can of paint that evoke the drippings in the painting, the merging of body lines, torn by light and movement, with the structure of the painting behind. The dissolution of the contours of the artist's body in the photographic structure seems to *narrate* the disappearance of the body in Pollock's art. In an emotionally charged dialect of art criticism, Michael Fried reconstructed this topos of dissolution 15 years later as an act of liberation on the road to pure opticality:

⁵ See Guilbaut; on Stalinist painting, see Gassner.

⁶ See Schiff.

Line, in these paintings, is entirely transparent both to the non-illusionistic space it inhabits but does not structure, and to the pulses of something like pure, disembodied energy that seems to move without resistance through them. . . . In these works Pollock has managed to free line not only from its function of representing objects in the world, but also from its task of describing and bounding shapes or figures . . . on the surface of the canvas. (14)

The photo proves to be a successful interpretation of the very myth of painting that Fried formulates in the language of art criticism, precisely in the way the artist's body is photographically re-inscribed into an art of "disembodied energy."

It is more difficult to describe the mythological story told by Cecil Beaton's fashion photo. We can, however, start with the fact that it became a kind of evidence for the attempt of Serge Guilbaut (among others) to deconstruct the myth of pure art, namely modernism à la Greenberg, whose leading artist was Pollock.⁷

In Guilbaut's argument—which had its predecessors in writings from the seventies by Max Kozloff,⁸ among others—Greenberg's narrative is mixed with the ideological battle around formalism and realism of the Cold War. Two enemies emerge here: Greenberg's myth of modernism, which dominated American art for decades, and American capitalist cultural hegemony, as established during the Cold War. The myth of modernist abstract painting established New York's leading position in the international art world, supplanting Paris—as the title of Guilbaut's well-known book indicates: *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*. Guilbaut argues that Greenberg's ideas promoted the hegemony of American capitalism by providing narrative material for the claim that American abstract art, as an expression of artistic freedom, was a symbol for the free world, battling the artistic dictatorship represented by content-obsessed Stalinist realism. In denouncing this art as complicitous to capitalism and the CIA in the cold war, Beaton's fashion model in front of *Autumn Rhythm* could thus also provide useful

⁷ Cf. The Cover of Guilbaut's *Reconstructing Modernism*, which uses Beaton's photograph.

⁸ See Kozloff.

evidence for the link between modernist art and elite capitalist consumerism. This eighties' revision of "formalist" modernism, which combines leftist positions with the attempt to deconstruct the Greenbergian myth of "pure" painting, is now itself being revised as moralistic and based on the ideology of 1968. For instance, Kirk Varnedoe's text for Pollock's retrospective in the MOMA in New York, where he calls "promoting the New York School art as a form of cold war propaganda for U.S. interests" paranoid (72).

In contrast, for the readers of 1950 *Vogue*, this photo might well have been interpreted within the older avant-garde topos of merging art into life, or its converse. However, many critics were not and are still not convinced by this intermingling, namely those who attempt to defend the borders between art and life, especially the boundaries between "high" and "low," between art and fashion. The readers of *Vogue*, and Beaton and the editors of the magazine as well, who introduced Pollock quite early to a wider audience, might well have seen the myth of beauty and harmony that overwhelms the distinction between "high" and "low" literally embodied in this visual merging of model/fashion and painting surface. Timothy Clark, in contrast, belongs among those that favor retaining the boundaries between fashion and art, this time from a leftist perspective: "Fashion changes and art endures" (180), he writes, a slight consolation in face of the appropriation of forms of art supposedly resistant to consumption and capitalism by capital and consumption. Both versions of a story of beauty that can harmonize consumption and art, are first made legible by the figure, the body, the image-body of the model in the context of the photo's publication in *Vogue*.

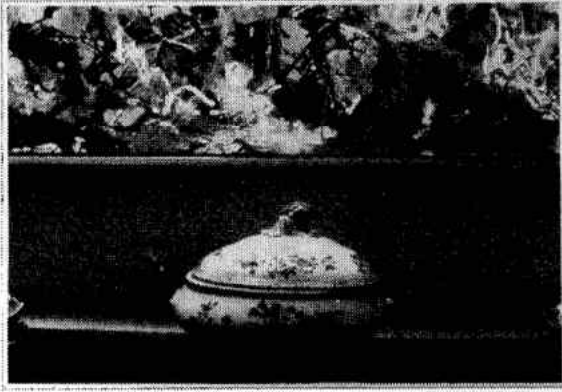
Thus it is photography which, in this radical moment of taking leave from all meaning-generating reference in painting, serves as the central medium which emphasizes the production of meaning—albeit inside the art system itself. Photography renews the gaze on the world that the painting of someone like Pollock refuses, but that had been provided by intensely narrative genres like historical painting. Photography offers a kind of replacement for the image surface of painting, which had become

opaque with the coming of abstraction, by making the surface once again transparent. It frees the gaze for a "reality" that itself shows the impermeability of the painted surface, but allows this impermeability to be forgotten in the staging of the photographic image in combination with the figure of the painter and the fashion beauty. This kind of photography emplots abstract painting, as earlier figurative painting emplotted a story worth telling. What might have been read as a breach with the principles of artistic modernism clearly remained unnoticed, since the technical characteristic of the medium offered these images a kind of 'modernistic' optic, which made it possible to place them in the same modernist art-discourse as the paintings of Pollock that were visible in the photographs.

A unique side effect of the confrontation of these two photos is that their image bodies also refer to the value hierarchy to which their respective narratives belong: the masculinity of the art genius, signifier—or conversely signified—of heroic art, contrasted with the femininity of a fashion beauty profaning this art.

It is precisely this impurification of the high by the low in the heroic narrative of the American avant-garde which postmodern criticism used for its deconstruction of the modernist ideals, while one might say that these were confirmed simultaneously. Thus, Cecil Beaton's fashion photo from the 1950 Pollock exhibition went through a revival in the 1980s. As I put it earlier, in this new discursive context it took on a kind of cult status. Critical deconstruction crystallized a new narrative, which located its allegorical bodily representation in the model, especially since, not only for the observers from 1950, but also for the deconstructive gaze of the 1980s, the color harmony between model and painting as well as the accented spatial proximity of the two clearly seems to suggest a kind of merging of the model-body and its environment with the body of the painting and the space of the painting *Autumn Rhythm*.

Appropriation Art, a postmodern art praxis critical of capitalism, would replace the body of the model with the body of a bulging, 'femininely' curved baroque tureen, as Louise Lawler did in her photo *Pollock and Tureen* in the early 1980s. This work exposes the modernist myth as



Louise Lawler, *Pollock and Tureen*, 1984, photograph. From: Bickerton, 84. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

commodity value, as is illustrated by the logic of the private collection. The proximity of both these collector's objects, Pollock and baroque tureen, does not cause the two objects to merge in the near elimination of space between them, as is the case in Beaton's photo, but rather serves to problematize the functional space of art. For

Lawler we can claim the critical intentions which Craig Owens in 1980 claimed for postmodernism:

Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference. . . . its deconstructive thrust is aimed not only against the contemporary myths that furnish its subject matter, but also against the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art. (85)

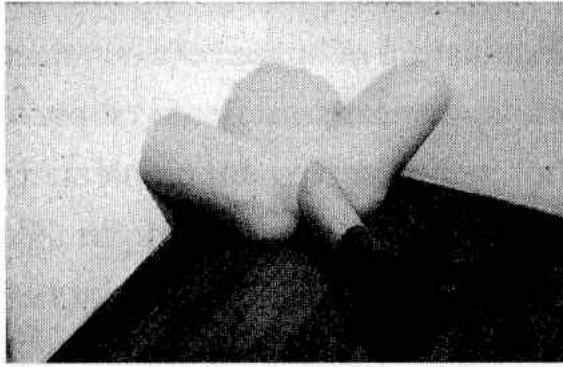


Richard Billingham, *Untitled*, 1993-95, color photograph on aluminum. From: Adams 53.

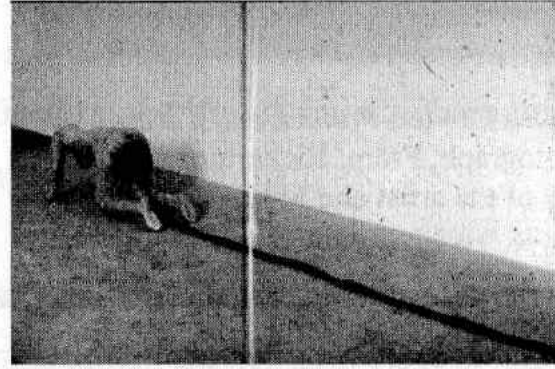
Today, a turning away from such intentions seems to be making itself evident. The deconstructive refiguration of the art of the last decade, especially in abject art, with its montages of signifying body fragments—as in the works of Kiki Smith or Robert Gober, to name but two artists working in this field returns precisely because of its anti-syntactic referentiality to a rhetorical structure of the allegorical production of meaning that also requires the image of the body. It does so in a way, which today no longer entails the kind of subversive confusion of signs Craig Owens had hoped for in 1980.

But even the dubious critical potential of abject art in the last few years is undercut by the large format color photographs by young artists like Richard Billingham that focus on social issues, which are gladly shown

and purchased at art fairs. If the unified image of the whole body for the younger generation of artists has now again become the last refuge for its self-affirmation as an art which regards itself as social and political because it *depicts* social and political injustice, then we have indeed landed in the era of the post-postmodern.



Robert Gober, *Man Coming Out of the Woman*, 1993-94. Beeswax, human hair, sock, leather shoe. Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris. Courtesy of the artist. From: Berndac, ill. 429.



Kiki Smith, *Tale*, 1992. From: Deitch. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein.

Michael Leja's attempt to revalorize the figurative in Pollock's work is formulated as a counter-position to the formalist, modernist interpretation that, according to him, still prevails in the recent New York exhibition, curated by Kirk Varnedoe.

Figuration plays a role on both sides of his project: on the one hand, it signifies control over his medium, while on the other hand it serves to break up the abstract order of the all-over in many of his pictures. . . . Figuration was part of a basic striving towards heterogeneity in classical art . . . honoring the complex meaning of figuration in Pollock's work . . . can allow metaphoric reactions [and] enriches all attempts to describe the spatial effects of Pollock's paintings. (39)

As much as figuration here functions as the discursive difference from formalist totality, the affirmative potential still becomes clear: An identity seems to be catered to, integrating Pollock into a postmodern genealogy—far from deconstructing the modernist myth of the artist's subjectivity—and the figurative, the body image seems to be a revealing referent (a more than adequate symptom) for it—the ultimate, postmodern revenge on Greenberg's modernism, enacted on his central hero Pollock.

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MICHAEL WETZEL

American Appropriationists and the Lolita-Complex

Children are always looking beautiful. . . . They always have the perfect nose. I've never seen an unattractive baby. Small features and nice skin. This also applies to animals. I've never seen a bad looking animal. . . . Beauty doesn't have anything to do with sex. Beauty has to do with beauty and sex has to do with sex.

(Andy Warhol)

Childhood sexuality is an oxymoron. (Sally Mann)

Brooke Shields' Photograph

In 1983 a small gallery opened in a store front on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The name of this gallery was *Spiritual America*,¹ and the only object of the exhibition in the small room was a gilt frame hanging on the wall. It showed a color photograph representing a nude child with the oiled body of an adult porno model.

The name of the child was Brooke Shields. The photo had been taken in 1973 by a commercial photographer for her mother Terri, who was eager to promote her daughter as a movie-star like Shirley Temple had once been. The success came soon: *Pretty Baby*, Louis Malle's famous film about a child prostitute (1976) made her daughter a celebrity. But what about the earlier photograph? How did it get into the gallery? In 1983, ten years after it had been taken?

The 'author' of this act/fact was the young artist Richard Prince, who worked as a picture researcher at that time. He discovered the print, stole it and exhibited it anonymously in the locations mentioned above which were especially created for this purpose. For more than one reason he left

¹ In what sense this name could be read as a reference to Alfred Stieglitz's famous photograph one can only speculate about.

New York immediately afterwards and went underground. The scandal was extraordinary because of the public image of the now teenage-girl star, but the success was extraordinary as well.

Prince used or abused the issue to turn the art gallery into the site of a confrontation with voyeurism and media-fascination. Brook Shields' picture was the first in a series of images shown in that gallery. Both the apparent neutrality of the art context and the myth of creativity that goes with it were challenged by the appropriation of stereotypical images of what Prince called *Spiritual America*: the essence of all the hidden yet obvious desires of American culture. The visitors of his uncanny exhibition were made to feel complicit in a revelation of a secret: The secret of the child's body, exhibited in a way that stimulated and violated the fundamental myth of children's innocence as a symbol of immaculate and pure nature, a myth emerging from the anthropology of Romanticism which propagated a significant ambivalence in adoring the child as neuter and as swain. The pertinent beauty of the child, especially of the girl's body, relies on the fiction of androgyny. To understand what is at stake here in terms of representation, we have to take into account the iconographic aspect of the notion of the sublime. Due to conceptual indecidability, the (girl) child becomes something like a monster—in the etymologically double sense of an obscene demonstration of and an exuberant withdrawal from what cannot be represented.

This is—in short—the essential problem of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, which deals with the fatal attraction of the sublime erotics of a child-woman. The novel marked the beginning of the appropriation of a new "sense of the body" and especially "of power in its representation and control of a specific body: that of the child", which led to the deplorable but undeniable usage of "Lolita" as a "generic, vulgate term for an item of what is known as child pornography" (Michelson 4). This issue—the complex intertwinings of representation and Otherness, art and pornography—provides the background of the picture appropriated by Richard Prince. What is there to be seen?

An image of a child's body in the familiar flesh colors of a pornographic picture appears out of a monochromatic self-enclosed world. Brooke Shields appears otherworldly, as though she were somehow occupying a celestial realm. Her head looks huge in comparison to the human scale of the foreground statuette. The pose she adopts is a combination of coyness and availability, awkwardness and knowingness, exposure and concealment. Like most pedophilic representations, the child is made to adopt a deliberately inflexible, artificially aesthetic posture. (Brooks 88)

The representation of Shields' body is characterized by the erect posture in opposition to the misty background, and by the melancholic silhouette of the inclining sculpture in the foreground. Aesthetically, such icono-



Richard Prince, *Spiritual America*, 1983. Courtesy Schürmann Collection.

graphic and theatrical devices refer not so much to the beautiful but to the sublime, to something that—according to Kant's famous definition—cannot be represented. Kant argues that the sublime should be read symbolically instead, as a *mise-en-scène* of a moral order of the spiritual. Thus the title of Richard Prince's artistic presentation/performance, *Spiritual America*, is overdetermined, not only in the sense of an ironical commentary on American (media) culture, but also in the sense of the aesthetic tradition of the latent eroticism of the sublime.

Following Kant, Derrida compared the sublime to the colossal (136-38), a threatening representation of what is beyond human scale, but which nevertheless makes something visible which is at stake—albeit implicitly—in the symbolic order of reference as the ultimate signifier of power. Derrida refers to the transcendental signifier of sexual difference: the unrepresentable phallus in the Lacanian sense, which plays its role as a magnifying signifier, yet remains veiled in the mystic blur of what Lacan called—with Hegel—"*Aufhebung*" as the withdrawal of visibility from within the visible itself (Lacan, *Signification* 692-695).

What Richard Prince set up in the gallery is an exhibition of an exhibition. The double frame does not erase the picture but re-enforces it in

demonstrating the libidinal economies that sustain it. Prince effectively conjures up the 'erectible' spirit of the phallus, in the ghostly form of a female child's body exhibited as the ultimate secret of male domination.

Appropriationism

The method Prince used in his first exhibition of the series called *Spiritual America* highlights its own criminal character. Ostentatiously marked by thievery and transgression, it tests the limits of ownership rights: for Prince stole a picture of a well-known celebrity and turned this fact into an artistic act—he made an illicit image illicit in yet another sense. A similar story was told before—not about photographs though, but about a purloined letter. Poe's detective story might be regarded as a paradigm for the strategy of the American group of artists represented by Richard Prince: the Appropriationists. Their work is characterized by a specific concern for recycling or re-entering the pre-existent cultural iconography. By transposing some of its elements into the context of artistic representation, this iconography changes its outlook and its composition: details may become larger than the total image, the blow up of the reproduction may look more original than the original itself.



Richard Prince, *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 1991-92. Chromogenic development print, ed. ½. 49 in. x 70 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Jean Douglas, Doris and Donald G. Fisher, Elaine McKeon, Byron R. Meyer and Helen and Charles Schwab.

Apart from the Shields picture, Prince became famous for his fragmented blow ups of the Marlboro ads by which he demonstrated the pertinence of the American dream of a 'smoke'-like spirituality. Other appropriationists like Sherry Levine experimented with the effect of reproduction (of doubling or copying) by taking photographs of the famous photographic series by Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—

transforming reproductions into originals based on reproductions and probing artistic authorship after 'the death of the author' (Owens 122-139, Foster 145-153).² Of course the basic idea of appropriationism comes from Marcel Duchamp's ready mades, real objects that became works of art by the simple effect of their exhibition in a museum or gallery. As elements of every day life they were ready to be used; turned into artistic objects they became isolated and exposed.

It is not by chance that the medium all these artists use is photography. Roland Barthes was one of the first to emphasize the ambivalent character of this medium of technical reproduction. Photography records and stores the traces of the real as the denotational dimension of the picture, but at the same time expresses or marks the mythological cathexis of cultural iconographies as its connotation. The photographic message thus constitutes a double bind of originality/authenticity and of cultural appropriation, of first and second nature, of literal and allegorical meaning.

Barthes introduced this opposition between denotation and connotation in two texts from the early 60s: "The Photographic Message" and "Rhetoric of the Image." The first deals with press-photos, while the second takes the example of an advertisement of *Panzani* for spaghetti and tomato-sauce. In both cases Barthes gives photography a special paradoxical status: he calls it "a message without code," for the connotation is linked to something real (the photographic picture as trace of the real object). Following Peirce, Barthes argued that the technically produced image must not be read as an *icon* but as an *index*: the performative reference (the context) is relevant, not the iconographic or symbolic order. There are at least three dimensions of semiotic meaning: the purely linguistic dimension (called by Peirce the symbol in its widest sense); a more imaginary dimension (described by Peirce as the icon and by Barthes as the "double" of the linguistic message, namely the "pure image"). And finally the reference to the objects.

² See Crimp.

The signifieds of this third message are constituted by the real objects in the scene, the signifiers by these same objects photographed, for, given that the relation between thing signified and image signifying in analogical representation is not arbitrary (as it is in language), it is no longer necessary to dose the relay with a third term in the guise of the psychic image of the object. . . . we have here a loss of the equivalence characteristic of true sign systems and a statement of quasi-identity. In other words, the sign of this message is not drawn from an institutional stock, is not coded, and we are brought up against the paradox . . . of a *message without a code*. . . . The literal message appears as the *support* of the 'symbolic' message. Hence, knowing that a system which takes over the signs of another system in order to make them its signifiers in a system of connotation, we may say immediately that the literal image is *denoted* and the symbolic image *connoted*. Successively, then, we shall look at the linguistic message, the denoted image, and the connoted image. (Barthes 272-73)

The significance of denotation, as the reproduction of pure nature, disrupts the cultural codes. But the problem is that if—to quote MacLuhan's famous sentence—the medium is the message, we know about this referent only through the apparatus as a *dispositif* of representation, for the object itself has no representation. It is only given as a withdrawal, as a disappearance behind the veil of the medium. It is under cover, crossed over: off the records.

This problem is also articulated in psychoanalytical discourse where, in the terms of Jacques Lacan, the imaginary and the real can only be grasped discussed according to the rules of the symbolic. What Barthes is interested in is not the real as an ontological entity but the imaginary aspect of the real (the dimension of withdrawal). The *punctum* marks an absence in the presence of the representation which is at stake in the re-evaluation of the imaginary as impact, as a paradoxical double message combining index and icon. For the dominant meaning of the photograph is not the pure depiction of the innocent object, i.e. the mass of primordial data registered by the random access of the camera-lens, but the informing of the data-processing by the pragmatic perspective of fantasy, to quote Judith Butler:

And this is not to say that fantasy supplies its own thematic, but that the boundaries of the real against which it is determined are precisely what become problematized in fantasy. Fantasy suspends the ontological claim of that which passes as the real under the usual description. (Butler 110)

This is why artists can use photography as a medium of appropriation of the spiritual values of a given culture. They track down the visual data of a social representation and charge it with the power of fantasy, which makes the reproduction ambiguous. Richard Prince is interested not only in the authenticity of the pictures he used or abused, but in their phantasmagorical or phantasmatic intensity, i.e. in their *look* as objects—in other words, he tries to elucidate the altered or alienated object of desire as it emerges from the field of perception (Lacan, *Concepts* 65-67; Rose 190-92):

The pictures I went after, 'stole', were too good to be true. They were about wishful thinking, public pictures, that happen to appear in the advertising sections of mass market magazines, pictures not associated with an author It was their look I was interested in. I wanted to re-present the closest thing to the real thing. (qtd. in Brooks 85)

"The closest thing to the real thing": what does that mean? With these purloined pictures, the original is shown as an effect in the supplementary chain of reproduction, as an always already deferred and lost origin, as retroactive 'development' (also in the photographic sense) of a hidden constellation. It is not the look *of* the real which is produced in this way, rather the look *addresses* the real and simultaneously gazes at the viewer.³ Prince is playing with the double sense of the good *looks* of the reproduced picture and the active *gaze* returned by the viewed object.

It is this look of the object which asserts the iconic power of the picture and makes it a representative example of the visual culture Prince wants to get close to in order to expose its structure. The example of the stolen photo of Brooke Shields fulfills this purpose perfectly. It reveals a gender structure at work in *Spiritual America*: the difference of *looking* and *being looked at* is a gendered difference maintained by discourse. Visual representations of masculinity and femininity differ strongly in terms of the phantasmagoria of power created by the image. John Berger described it as a difference between an expressive gesture of male selfhood and the self-referentiality of female glamour:

³ Cf. Lacan, *Concepts*.

A man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies . . . it suggests what he is capable of doing. . . . By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura. . . . But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image. . . . *Man act and women appear* (45-47)

To quote Laura Mulvey's famous essay on visual pleasure: in images of women, the absence of the phallic signifier triggers the substitution of male desire along the symbolic chain of fetishistic objects, marked "by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack in fantasy" (16). It is this fetishistic cathexis of the female body which is exhibited (and exploited) by Prince in his gallery, where all the erotic references of the stolen picture are reframed within the phallic scene of an explicit voyeurism. As both psychoanalysis and feminist theory repeatedly stated, the symbolic phantom called phallus owes its significant power to its absence, namely to the trauma of castration. *Lack, withdrawal, absence, trauma* are the transcendental conditions under which the stars of the phallic constellation are born. And so the artistic practice of the appropriationists becomes in a certain way itself a kind of fetishistic manipulation appropriating the phallus as something that could only be appropriated as stolen, detached from an original context.

This is why Brooke Shields' photograph confronts us with a visual complex that combines a repertoire of typical poses, attitudes and gestures, a certain kind of lighting, and certain props and ornamental details. The exaggerated theatricality is an effect of Price's appropriation: the picture is shown in its function as an *apotropaion*, veiling the void of the other. This exhibition/exposure of the female body makes the iconographic over-determination evident by foregrounding the connotations of emblematic scenes or allegorical situations which serve to "unmark"⁴ sexual difference by casting the female body in an androgynous form.

⁴ See Phelan.

With that observation, it seems to me, we touch the most significant aspect of *Spiritual America* or, in other words, of a very specific obsession with American beauty. Why does a picture bearing that name show a girl, a child who represents the fetishistic impact of phallogentrism? The answer lies in the mythology of childhood and its ideal of innocence. With Puritan restraints still forming a discernible strain of American culture, the concept of the child as an anthropological ideal of an unsexed and pure being has been pertinent, even though the child has long become a study object of medical discourses on sexual development. As a consequence, the image of childhood is deeply ambivalent. In Shields' photograph we see—on the level of the denotation—the perfectly unmarked body of a child; on the other hand the pose and the situation—as connotation—evoke the male fantasy of perverse lust and domination. But fantasy functions as a withdrawal from the real object: the picture talks of what had been there, but of what we have no other testimony than the substitute of its referent, the track or mark or signifier on the verge of fantasmatic presence.

What adds to the impact of fantasy is the image of youth. Other artists before Richard Prince drew attention to infantile aspects of American culture, e.g. pop-art which emphasized all kinds of play and games. With good reason Andy Warhol turned himself into an image of the artist as eternal child.

The work is not trivial or fatuous for that, because in this country in particular, adolescence has an undeniable power and mythology behind it, no less complex and redoubtable than Freud's or Wordsworth's childhood, in the sense that the adulthood that follows on it can be made to seem simply a limiting case of its extension. (Lewis 77)

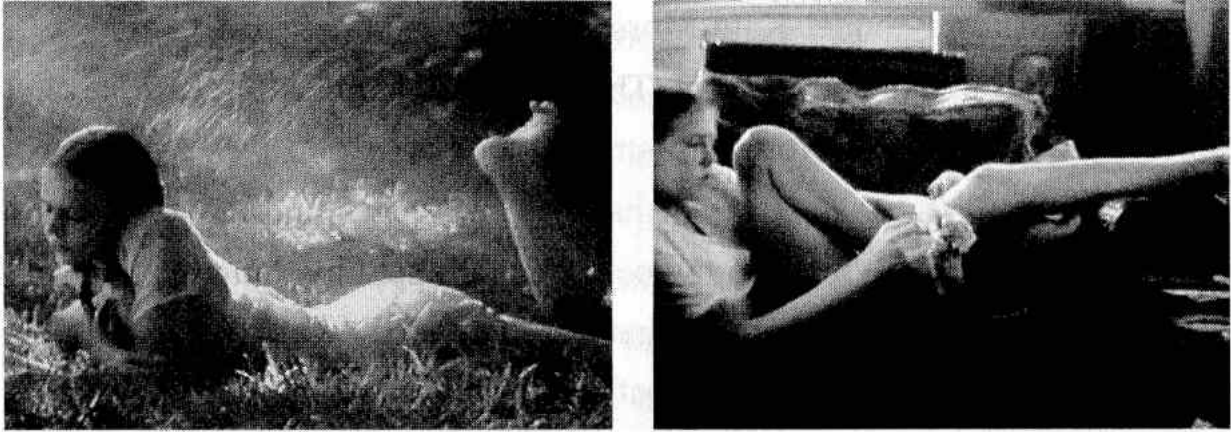
The Lolita-Complex

But there is a special cultural investment in the image of the child-woman. As used, say, by Charles Dickens in his novel *David Copperfield*, the notion refers to the Romantic tradition of 1800 when such ambiguous creatures made their first literary appearance in the fiction of Goethe, Novalis and Hoffmann.⁵ Its most well-known fictional adaptation resounds in the famous term of the *Lolita-Complex*, coined by Simone de Beauvoir in reference to the novel by Nabokov dedicated to the adoration of *nymphets*, "maidens who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)" (Nabokov 16).

Beauvoir uses the term in her analysis of the early success of Brigitte Bardot not in France but in the USA. Discussing the film *And God Created Woman*, she relates this success to the history of women's rights in the USA. Beauvoir concludes that today only a child can cause real erotic tension:

The adult woman now inhabits the same world as the man, but the child-woman moves in a universe which he cannot enter. The age difference re-establishes between them the distance that seems necessary to desire. At least that is what those who have created a new Eve by merging the 'green fruit' and *femme fatale* types have pinned their hopes on. . . . Brigitte Bardot is the most perfect specimen of these ambiguous nymphs. Seen from behind, her slender, muscular, dancer's body is almost androgynous. Femininity triumphs in her delightful bosom. The long voluptuous tresses of Melisande flow down to her shoulders, but her hair-do is that of a negligent waif. The line of her lips forms a childish pout . . . Vadim presented her as a 'phenomenon of nature.' 'She doesn't act', he said. 'She exists.' (10-12) It is the fundamental opposition of the old European *ars amatoria* and the modern *scientia sexualis*, in other words the difference between the *imaginary* of erotic fantasies and the *real* of a sexual impulse driven by mere biological necessity. According to Beauvoir, BB owes her erotic attraction as a child-wife-hoyden to the natural value of the image, i.e. to the promise of denotation instead of connotation as a cultural fantasy. But in the end, like the object of Humbert Humbert's desire, she turns out to be yet another effect of voyeuristic fetishism.

⁵ See Steedman and Wetzel.



Dominique Swain as Lolita. Dir. Andrew Lyne, *Lolita*, 1999.

The same ambivalence can be shown to be at stake in the exhibitions of the American photographer Jock Sturges, to give another recent and rather prominent example. Not only does Sturges take pictures of young nudes, he is also violating the taboo against the invasion of privacy by exposing the intimate world of nudist beaches. In the cool atmosphere of a museum, his assurance—offered by way of excuse—that he does not undress his models, but captures them as they are, in their natural attitudes and postures, seems all too weak. For viewers it is difficult to rid themselves of the feeling of voyeurism, of seeing something in public that wasn't meant to be seen there—a display of the naked bodies of young girls who are exposed to a particular physical as well as psychological vulnerability in the period of transition between childhood innocence and the first intimations of sexual certainty.

Why young girls, why naked, and why in the setting of nudism? If all that Sturges wanted to do was to document the paradise regained by nudism his choice of visual motifs could surely have been more varied. As it is, the mature body makes only a marginal appearance in a handful of family scenes; elderly nudes are absent, and the few and scattered portraits of boys serve only as ridiculous counter-examples. The predominance of one particular type among these models is rather uncanny: the white Anglo-American girl as the embodiment of a certain ideal of beauty.

To argue from the theory of fetishism discussed above, it is the physical incompleteness, the androgyny of the body that constitutes the erotic

promise of these images and ensures the lasting attraction of idols like Calvin Klein's star model Kate Moss or Vanessa Paradis, to name just a few of Twiggy's many successors. This image of femininity made its first appearance among the European bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century, re-emerged in the Victorian era, and has reached new importance after the First World War, evolving into the new ideal adopted by American society as the antithesis of the seductive, maternal and fertile woman. This is the *femme fragile*, whose sometimes pathologically emaciated appearance is celebrated in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, and at least in the photographs and graphic art of the nudist cult of German reform movements. The young girl's underdeveloped body is thus formed into a new prototype of womanhood, and it is this ill-proportioned appearance that certain risqué artists unmasked as its hidden sexual appeal. It is therefore no surprise that the poses of the girls photographed by Sturges recall the child-women of Klimt, Kokoschka and Schiele. A model by the allegorical name of *Misty Dawn* embodies the rejection of sexual identity by way of anorexia: pathological slimness as a way to maintain the illusion of childlike sexual in-difference.⁶

In his essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, Friedrich Schiller suggested an answer to the question of the source of this idiosyncratic ideal of beauty. Interestingly enough, this answer could be related to *Spiritual America* as a trope of the American utopianism; for Schiller states that the fascination of the child comes from the sense of an "immense openness to destiny" which the child, reduced to "predisposition and destiny," awakens in us (542, my translation). Sturges refers to this Romantic image of gracefulness, and in doing so recalls the qualities of silent greatness and noble simplicity as celebrated by Winckelmann and his followers, for whom the greatest attraction of ancient art was its predilection for the youthful and spring-like. What links the modern motif of the child-woman to this cultural tradition is the fascination with the brief period of transition from childhood to the sexual identity and desire of an adult. That this passage is

⁶ The editors regret that they were unable to obtain the artist's permission to reproduce *Misty Dawn* with this article.

irreversible has made it a prominent trope of a melancholic sense of temporality. "The moment of puberty is the moment in both sexes at which the body can attain its highest degree of beauty: but one may truly say: it is but a moment!" Goethe exclaims and comes to the following conclusion: "The butterfly pays for fertilisation and reproduction with its life: the human being with its beauty" (118, my translation).

Hence the obsession that led him to the subtle pursuit of the beauty of young girls—a beauty that is unique because it is transitory but that also conceals a secret—the secret of the imperceptible transition from a sexually indeterminate child to a sexually differentiated woman. It is the same trope of the butterfly as an image of metamorphosis that accompanies Nabokov's description of *Lolita* as a nymphet.

Sturges is the heir to this literary and pictorial tradition, which is even more prominent in the history of photography. Not only did the production of nude photographs make up an excessive proportion of the photographic production in the period following the invention of the daguerreotype; the use of young girls as models also became fashionable at this early stage. To give a well-known example: Lewis Carroll was the author of *Alice in Wonderland*, but he also took innumerable photographs of young girls, frequently in the nude. The obsessions with the idea of bringing time to a standstill, and/or with the longing for an eternal childhood are imminent. But there is also the ambiguity of a portrayal of childhood innocence and a lurking eroticism, which is all the more daring given the fact that most of his models were much less than ten years of age.

All the examples of this tradition reveal the same contradiction between the documentary need on the one hand (to capture time by showing the changes that have already taken place) and the phantasmatic need to deny temporality by neutralizing them on the iconographic level. As was often emphasized in the context of photographic images of children—like in Sally Mann's nude family pictures of her kids—, the medium plays a pivotal role both for the representation of sexuality and its censorship:

Because photography is seen as having the indexical power to convey truth, photography engenders much stronger reactions—passions, indignation, outrage—than other arts. . . . But because of its indexical and momentary nature—to slice an instant out of time and space; to freeze action; to shoot, expose and fix its objects—photography is an untrustworthy ally of the sexual and the violent. Isolating and fetishizing the static moment inevitably bestows upon the object of the photograph a kind of death, and the photographs render that death infinitely repeatable. (Ehrhart 54, 60)

To return to the contradiction, elaborated by Barthes, between denotation (as reference to the real) and connotation (of the cultural repertoire of phantasmatic images): the photographs of Jock Sturges are true *only* in their mythological message, which makes a statement *about* the subject of the picture. They cannot be read in terms of the difference between representation and the real but only in terms of the difference between desire and its image. It is a misunderstanding (to say the least) when Jock Sturges appeals to the denotational meaning of photography as a confirmation of the authenticity of the image. For the question here is not whether the girls are rendered as they are or have an identity imposed on them, but what sort of longing is expressed in these pictures and how the photo-sculptural (not the real) bodies of the girls answer to this desire. Or, to put it differently, what sort of self-portrait of the artist is reflected by these smooth body surfaces. In contrast, Richard Prince's appropriation of popular images deconstructs the myth of immaculateness.

What remains to be analysed is the conjunction of the erotic image of the androgynous child-woman with the iconography of virginity. From the nymphs of antiquity dwelling in streams, in rivers and on beaches, to the more ambivalent creatures of the Romantic imagination, such as Undine and Melusine as spirits of an original but disappearing nature, both motifs have been intertwined. When Prince calls his image *Spiritual America*, this is another meaning implied in it: the image of Brooke Shields is turned into a trope of America as 'Virgin Land.'

It was along these lines that Simone de Beauvoir analysed the enthusiastic reception which the young Brigitte Bardot, both tomboy and hoyden, was accorded by American men (and American women). Sobered by the

sexual equality of their everyday life routines, males discovered the indispensable stimuli of erotic desire in the image of the child-woman:

She is temperamental, changeable and unpredictable, and though she retains the limpidity of childhood, she has also preserved its mystery. A strange little creature, all in all; and this image does not depart from the traditional myth of femininity. . . . She appears as a force of nature, dangerous as long as she remains untamed, but it is up to the male to domesticate her. . . . BB is a lost, pathetic child who needs a guide and a protector. This cliché has proved its worth. It flatters masculine vanity; it reassures mature and maturing women. (13-15)

Of course this male fantasy about the eternally seductive female is not disturbed by but rather predicated upon the obvious artificiality of this 'nature.' Sturges' girls are another case in point. Here the premise of natural immediacy is conflated with the obvious citation of cultural iconography. And to give yet another example, this is also evident in Sally Mann's *Immediate Family*, a series of intimate family photos where the controversial nude pictures of her daughters are covered, as though of their own accord, with motifs of kitsch belonging to the nineteenth-century idolatry bordering on the perverse.⁷

Sally Mann's photographs have been interpreted by critics in terms of a return of the real as trauma—of time and of sexual difference. There are images of the "unimaginable" showing a "damaged child: corpselike, post-coital, victimized, abused":

While Mann is thematizing explicitly what lies implicitly within any photograph (the alliance of the image, the fetish, and death), this connection of violence and eroticism drawn over her own child's body certainly raises questions for many about her motives—artistic and maternal. Yet there can be no denying that this is a powerful, compelling image which conveys the very real link between the scopoc-erotic nature of photographic representation and the aestheticization of violence. (Ehrhart 65-67)

Using the effect of appropriation, Richard Prince demonstrates this link as a shift from reality (as an effect of representation) to the real (as an effect of a materialized trauma). Clearly, appropriation is not only the effect of reduplication but produces an analytical transformation by taking all the moments of the iconography of cultural power into recursive account. This

process has been described as an "elaboration of illusion" through "super-realism" or through a "constructionist vision of reality":

Prince manipulates the superrealistic look of these ads to the point that they are *derealized* in the sense of appearance but *realized* in the sense of desire. (Foster 145-46)

To summarize: by a variety of cultural practices, the (girl) child's body is turned into a image which serves as a fetishistic object of desire because it denies sexual difference and hence wards off the trauma of castration. As a trope of immaculateness, the child's body lends itself to longings for a lost innocence, and to melancholic musings on temporality. Its flamboyant eroticism stems from the combination of both fantasies into a phallic construct of the first order: the girl child's yet unblemished body invites and affirms male domination—be it as a caress, as an inscription or as violence—as the inevitable and imminent work of time.

The works of the artists discussed in this essay cite and conflate the Romantic images of the child (which are themselves ambivalent as they portray the child as a *yet* innocent creature) and the psychological and medical inquiries into the sexual development of children. They use a specific staging of what Barthes calls the effect of the real. Jock Sturges claims the denotational value of his pictures taken at nudist camps and beaches and thus caters to the voyeuristic fetishism of the audience without disrupting it by aesthetic means. In contrast, Richard Prince's exhibition of Brooke Shields's pornographic pose in his gallery dramatizes and deconstructs the gendered axes of the look and the gaze which form the core of much of Western art no less than popular culture. Prince's appropriation of private or public photographs that display such fantasmatic energies puts the photographic condition—the indexical reference to the real—in parentheses. By effectively providing a new frame for these pictures, he allows for a critical evaluation of them *as images*.

⁷ Cf. Mann, see Dijkstra.

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HANNE LORECK

Cindy Sherman's *Sex Pictures*, Pornography, and the Real

At present, Cindy Sherman is one of the internationally best known and most successful American artists. Her more than 330 photographs include film stills, fashion photos, fairy tale-illustrations, disasters, molding foods, art-historical portraiture, scenes of dummies deployed in sex acts, horror pictures, and even a horror movie called *Office Killer*, which came out in 1997.¹ In the following essay I want to take a close look at some of the fifteen so-called *Sex Pictures* (*Untitled #250-264*, 1992). My purpose here is to examine some of their formal characteristics in order to highlight the critical potential of this thoroughly controversial series. This critique is aimed at a radical denaturalization of the sexual body. Specifically, I want to ask how Sherman presents the sexuality of the naked body as a deferred recall of the classical nude and its economical, discursive, and aesthetic contexts over the past two decades. This deferral presents an irritation of and a serious challenge to the coercive identification of the sexuality of the naked body (male or female) with heterosexual norms and the subsequent exclusion of homosexuality. These norms of identification had been most prominently defined in Jesse Helm's move to control and possibly censure most artistic representations sponsored by national funding that were concerned with the body and with sexuality. Sherman's *Sex Pictures* can be regarded as a poignant commentary on the so called culture-wars of the early 1990s² with its intense debates about censorship, the freedom of art, legal definitions of the obscene, and the difference between the naked and the nude. This is certainly due to the grotesque and fantastic allusions to

pornographic material which the series so obviously displays, but another reason is Cindy Sherman's special position in the art world which is anything but marginal to the centers of cultural power.³

Introduction

"And then came the genitally correct dummies who engage in very incorrect activities and show unabashedly their proclivities for the perverse," art critic Jan Avgikos wrote about the *Sex Pictures* and continued: "Dismembered but still coitally coupled, frozen in masturbatory gestures, practiced at S/M play, but in each instance so utterly without emotional dimension, they menace the viewer as they hammer at conventional codes of decency" (*Hell* 39). The metaphors bestowed by the press on Sherman's configurations,—calling them "limbless hermaphrodites and dismembered devil-dolls," (D'Amato 107) "postmenopausal Medusas," or "decapitated Herculesees" (Avgikos, *Burning* 76)—are revealing in their struggle for an ontological identification of even the most inexplicable bodily fragments and their constellations. Even if clothed in the fantastic garb of ancient and modern mythologies, these rhetorical strategies are fundamental to any discussion of pornography in terms of identity politics. As Judith Butler has shown, a causal conception of the relation between reality and representation which informs both the PorNo movement⁴ and the repressive institution of restrictive legal categories of the obscene (as aesthetic categories),⁵ leads to an misunderstanding of representation as "injurious

¹ With the exception of her early work, the black-and-white *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman never gave titles to her series of photographs; all other works are known by their working titles or those titles the reception brought into debate (which I will also be using here).

² For a resumé see Heins.

³ See Krauss, *Gravity* 206.

⁴ See Dworkin.

⁵ See Butler 122, fn. 1: "Obscenity in the Helms amendment is extended to include depictions of 'Homoeroticism, sadomasochism and child molestation' as well as 'individuals engaged in sex acts': in the Minneapolis code, 'obscene' is given the

action" (Butler 113). In her essay "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess" (1990), Butler instead calls for a radical deregulation of the sexual identity of the subject, its images and its locations (110).

In my mind, it is precisely the abundance of different if not mutual exclusive aesthetic and theoretical fantasies in and about the work of Cindy Sherman in general and in regard to the naked and fragmented bodies of mannequins in the series which make these images into *Sex Pictures*. I will attempt to describe the complexity of the visual and discursive horizon in which the *Sex Pictures* are inscribed: contemporary art, art and media history, postmodern theories and poststructuralist simulacra, the humanists' general desire for a representation of life in art, the feminist woman-as-picture under the gaze culturally coded as male.

According to Cindy Sherman, the *Sex Pictures* were planned to be about sexuality, about nakedness, and the naked body (Dickhoff 63). As I will illustrate, they also invoke the classical genre of the nude through images of the naked body exactly at the point of time when blasphemy and the obscene were reestablished as political categories. Sherman, however, obviously does not heed the crucial categorical differentiation between the naked and the nude, which had become the basis for the censorship wars in the visual realm. Instead, by producing bodily figurations which remind us of trashy pornography, she deconstructs the nude as being always already

following legal definition: (i) That the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest in sex of the average person; (ii) That the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive manner, sexual conduct specifically defined by the clause (b); [clause 'b' includes such acts as sexual intercourse, 'actual or simulated,' 'sodomasochistic abuse,' 'masturbation,' 'physical contact with the clothed or unclothed pubic areas or buttocks of a human male or female . . .']; (iii) That the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.' The Indianapolis code . . . reads similarly, but under 'b' reads, 'the material depicts or describes patently offensive representations or descriptions of ultimate sex acts, normal or perverted, actual or simulated, or patently offensive representations or descriptions of masturbation, excretory functions, and lewd exhibitions of the genitals.'" See also Heins 15-37. For the visual arts and the crucial opposition between art and obscenity see Nead 25-33.

an image, a naked body clothed in 'art,' an example of the regulated economy of art, usually of culturally esteemed and morally worthy high art. "The triumph of a 'successful' representation of the nude," Lynda Nead puts it in her summary of Kenneth Clark's famous 1956 survey *The Nude*, "is the control of its potential risk" (13). This risk concerns the threat that the image might become more than erotic, since erotic in the traditional nude designated a kind of sexual content free of any pornographic connotations. Here, pornography seems to be used synonymously with any visual representation producing sexual arousal. Historically specific rules have always regulated the representation of the nude in painting as a medium with its own material history. It is photography, however, that constantly blurs the relation between the process of signification and what is called reality. Only photography maintains the very special relation toward the referent which seems to appear immediately—without any mediation in the image; the naked body, emerges as a borderline figure, an effect of the mode of representation, not merely a question of a bare, mostly human and usually a female body. I will not explore in depth either the debate on pornography⁶ or the question whether the *Sex Pictures* are pornographic or not. Yet I will be using the pornographic as a discursive frame, although it will remain as vague in my discussion as it is in the *Sex Pictures* themselves, which of course profit from the general discussion of the early 1990s in feminism, art, and politics. I will, however, try to delineate a few figurations of differences in Sherman's visual stories of the naked body and the nude, not in their morality, but through a close viewing and reading of individual *Sex Pictures*.

⁶ For a critical approach from a feminist perspective see Cornell.

Difference #1: Is the Naked Still Naked if You Use Plastic Dummies and Rubber Torsos?

The 15 *Sex Pictures* have often been discussed as if they were a homogenous series. This is not the case. Although ordered from a catalog of a medical supply store, the prosthetic mannequins, both male and female, originally used for doctor's training, vary in their realistic look according to their medical functions. She was thrilled, Sherman says, by the huge range of body parts, the absolutely perfect, natural yet artificial bodies. In addition, she used fake body parts already familiar from her earlier works, and also make up, props, and, more crucially, a wide assortment of shiny fabrics. Rather than using sex dolls and toys, Sherman preferred the medically sober, machine-like and a-sexual look of the dummies, which, at the same time, seem to guarantee the binary gender model through their respective use in medicine. Thus, for instance, an anatomically complete plastic mannequin—sold in a coffin-like box together with interchangeable



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #258*, 1992.
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures.

male and female sexual parts—is deployed in *Untitled #258* and *#259*. Strangely enough, this dummy's official name is "Patient Michael" (Wallach 80) which must be interpreted as a sign for the continuity of the subject's cultural maleness even while the figure's artificial, 'male' biological organs and secondary characteristics are interchangeable with 'female' ones. On the other hand, the hyperrealistic male and female groins from *Untitled #253* were originally intended to teach the insertion of catheters. Their "skin part . . . must have been cast from older people, so it's very realistic,"

Sherman remarks, "and yet the vagina and the penis are sculpted from clay. I was just blown away and fascinated" (qtd. in Wallach 80). Concerning

the political aim of her *Sex Pictures*, Cindy Sherman does not necessarily have to speak a single word about sex: It is much more provocative to mention older people's skin, clay, and, of course, catheters, because inserting those tubes is quite a bizarre opposite to having sex. Here, the circle of displacements of representational forms so important for her work begins, whose effects then might really be seen as a comment on the cultural and political differences between the nude and the naked and between sexual and visual pleasures.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #253*, 1992. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures.

The displacement of mechanical medical prostheses and, with them, the scientific guarantee for the binary gender model in the depiction of strange sexual configurations is continued in the image *Untitled #253*. Here, the two torsos are literally opposite of each other, in a sexually non-functional, but highly arti-

ficial position, only loosely joined together by a piece of nicely patterned fabric and placed in close-up in the diffuse depths of the picture's space. Moreover, the 'head-less' sex act—partly cut by the frame two single heads can be seen on the side of the torsi—is an impossible one for more than one reason, since the vagina is occupied by a tampon (a rather basic icon of biological femininity) and the penis is decorated with a cock ring usually used to intensify male sexual pleasures. This ring is, however, in the wrong place, as Cindy Sherman once confessed to a male interviewer. And she added: "But honestly, I just let myself go while working on this. I fooled around a lot, and unconsciously let the whole thing run to the absurd" (qtd. in Dickhoff 66). Detailed confessions were an essential part of the regulative strategies of sexuality, Foucault had found out in *The*

History of Sexuality.⁷ "The deployment of sexuality has its reason for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way" (107). This sexualization of the body, emphasized during the 19th century, was renewed again in regard to the arts by the censoring efforts after 1990 in the U.S. This is the situation to which Sherman reacts with her *Sex Pictures*. They illustrate the grotesque, polymorphous apparatus of power and desire which is supported both by the porno image industry and the prohibition of allegedly obscene works of art. Yet the *Sex Pictures* would hardly be of any interest, if they would not also subvert the deployment of sexuality at the same time. Like someone who confesses to 'fooling around' in its sexual meaning, Cindy Sherman equally 'confesses' to the pleasure of constructing her images. The aim of her 'fooling around,' in order to find an image that suites her,⁸ however, runs counter to the obsession with detailed sexual functionality in pornography, as the example with the displaced cock ring demonstrates. But the playful and pleasurable process of image making, trailing the most fundamental signifiers of the pornographic, does not yield to sexual and aesthetic gratification when looking at the arrangements of the naked dummies. Sherman's photographs clearly deny the serenity of the classical categories of the nude. On the one hand, the artist exposes male and female genitalia in such an obvious way, that it seems to follow Foucault's thesis that the deployment of sexuality reduces the body to its sex. However, these genitalia are also obviously faked, they're made of plastic, arranged in shrill and overdone aesthetic compositions, while their 'mechanics' are anatomically incorrect. In a picture like *Untitled #258*, the sexual part is even missing. Instead, the viewer gazes at

⁷ Cf. 17-35 and 51-73.

⁸ "Ich habe herumexperimentiert, bis sich mir ein Bild zeigte, das ich akzeptieren konnte. Das gilt besonders für die *Sex Pictures*. . . . Ich wollte auch häßliche Bilder so attraktiv erscheinen lassen, daß man Lust hat, sie sich anzusehen." (Sherman qtd. in Jocks 234)

a big hole that vizualizes the whole idea of orifices and penetration in pornography:

Es geht mir nicht darum, Sexualität romantisch zu verklären. Einerseits möchte ich dieses Thema auf ein anderes Niveau heben, indem ich es neutralisiere, andererseits will ich bis zu einem gewissen Grad Angst und Schrecken verbreiten. (qtd. in Jocks 236).

Her bodies and their acts avoid the political discourse of obscenity as well as the phrase of "contemporary community standards" (Butler 122n), which ground its conception of sexual norms.

Difference #2: Realism and Abstraction

Let us come back to Cindy Sherman's curious observation in regard to the naturalism of prostheses, and especially of the male and female groins she joined end to end at the waist (*Untitled #253*). Again we get an ambiguous explanation from the artist:

These prostheses are so true to nature, that an artificial leg looks just like a genuine one. On some of the body parts you can even notice pores and wrinkles in the skin. One really gets the feeling as if these are body parts amputated from old men and women. This feeling is even more intense with external sex organs which look so shriveled and as if sculpted from clay. (qtd. in Jocks 233)

Neither the fantasy of amputated legs, nor the description of old, and no longer sexually active genitalia match the register of pornographic images and fantasies. And why does the artist in-form us about this technical aspect—these organs look as if "sculpted from clay"—which opens up a strange gap between high-tech medical supply and an outmoded form of art? Consciously or unconsciously Sherman is alluding to the ancient model of the sculptor's ability to represent something so naturalistically that, as in the Pygmalion myth, the—female—sculpture can come to life through her male creator's imagination. This narrative displaces any idea of a preexisting sexually marked body with its cultural significations. This narrative politics is once again displaced when Cindy Sherman comments on one of these clay-sculpted sexual parts shown in *Untitled #252*, which measures 190.5 x 127 cm:

It just looks like some modernist painting it's so close up. I wanted to blow it up so big that it would look almost abstract and also I think I was just commenting on the male presence in the art world. I was thinking of it hanging down, instead of the phallus that's pointing toward the sky. (qtd. in Wallach 80)



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #252*, 1992.
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures.

Here we have another aspect of a *Sex Picture*: Cindy Sherman does not actually call the clearly lit penis a penis—in her speech the subject of the image is represented by the 'it'—but transforms its symbolic function as a signifier in art and the art world, especially in art production, into the visual re-presentation of a fake penis without testicles. The image is not only a rather ironic allegory of abstraction itself—if you only blow up something big enough, it will become abstract—but also an image for the much discussed heroics of Abstract Expressionism and High

Modernism in general with its exclusively heterosexual painters. In *Untitled #262*, however, a vagina and anus are portrayed too, evenly exposed and shot through a filter, and thus turned into a red all-over. Therefore the images of genitals that Sherman is (not) talking about could also be perceived as *the* abstract manifestation of the pornographic as non-identical with sexual parts. This non-identity is emphasized through the format and the use of cinematic or photographic techniques like close-ups.

These images demonstrate that sexuality and desire are organized around the cultural and the social as well as the fantasmatic dimensions of media processes. As close-ups of artificial genitals, the pictures obviously break with the cultural conventions of the nude to represent the sexuality of the gaze and its usually aggressive phallic metaphors: the insisting or penetrating gaze.

Difference #3: The *Sex Pictures* and the Object-gaze

For Hal Foster, Cindy Sherman is the example par excellence of an artist who engages in a "double attack on subject and screen" (*Disgust* 85). Foster argues that Sherman's work underwent thematic and technical changes parallel to the shift in theoretical perspective from a concept of the real as an effect of representation to the concept of the real as an event of trauma. His argument goes against what he diagnoses as "the dissatisfaction with the textual model of culture and the conventional view of reality" (89). Therefore he wants to discuss current art "as if the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic" (89). Foster divides Sherman's work into three groups, and relates them to the Lacanian diagram of the gaze with its two interpenetrating triangles. Thus, her photographs from 1975 to 1982, the *Untitled Film Stills*, the *rear projections* as well as the *centerfolds* (and some smaller groups) can be seen as belonging to the subject-as-picture, the subject under the gaze.⁹ As Foster explains, in the *Fashion Photographs*, produced between 1987 and 1990, and later in the fairy tale-illustrations, the *History Portraits* and especially the disaster pictures, Sherman moved to the image-screen, understood as the sum of representational but also representative regulations. After 1990, Foster suggests, beginning with the *Civil War* images, the *Molding Foods*—which he discusses in the context of abjection and the grotesque—and the *Sex Pictures*, Sherman finally arrives at the object-gaze. In this group of images, the subject is, according to Foster, "obliterated by the gaze, only to return as disjunct doll parts" (*Return* 149). With the object-gaze Foster intends to politicize the Lacanian concepts of the gaze and the real through a materialistic approach. The gaze gets tied to certain objects, be it bodily fluids, vomit, excrements, hair and/or dead body parts. While judging Sherman's sex motifs as obscene rather than pornographic, he

⁹ Cf. Silverman 195-227, which offers an argument on subject formation and its visual terms different from Lacan's. Silverman stresses the historical condition of the gaze and argues against the assumption of a contemporary flood of images. Silverman finds subjective agency in mimicry, in self-conscious and disruptive acts of posing for the gaze. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* serve as Silverman's examples.

wants to establish an aesthetical as well as theoretical notion of the obscene in opposition to the New Rights' legal category. According to his definition, the obscene is where the object-gaze is presented "as if there were no scene to stage it, no frame of representation to contain it, no screen" (149; my emphasis). Thus the obscene is "where the object, without a scene, comes too close to the viewer" (153). In the pornographic register however, the object would "be staged for the viewer who is thus distanced enough to be its voyeur" (153).

Foster's definition of the obscene attempts to explore the relation between the image and the spectator as a space of negativity and exclusion. In contrast to Foster's description Judith Butler has situated the obscene within the framework of a theory of fantasy:

Hence, sexual fantasies may express a longing for a scene outside the fantasy, but the fantasy always figures that outside within its own terms, that is, as a moment inside the scene, effecting its fulfillment through a staging and distributing of the subject in every possible position. The consequence is that although it may well be some Other that I fantasize about, the fantasizing recasts that Other within the orbit of my scene, for fantasy is self-reflexive in its structure, no matter how much it enacts a longing for that which is outside the reach. (110)

Foster does not engage in a closer analysis of how the shift toward the object-gaze might be organized within Sherman's images, especially in the *Sex Pictures*. Regarding this work, he only offers the following brief and somewhat tendentious remark: the *Sex Pictures* are "punctuated by close-ups of simulated damaged and/or dead body-parts and sexual and/or excretory body-parts respectively. Sometimes the screen seems so torn that the object-gaze not only invades the subject-as-picture but overwhelms it" (*Disgust* 85). This comment is in fact not a description at all, but rather an evaluation, one of the many mythical interpretations, as Rosalind Krauss, author of the 1993 Cindy Sherman monograph, would put it in her extensive critique of the reception of the artist's work in the 1980s and early 1990s (*Untitled #20*). Foster's category of the 'obscene' does not really say very much in terms of a new illusionism or hyperrealism being pushed to the point of the (Lacanian) real, as Foster maintains for the most advanced avant-garde-art positions. Their illusionism or superrealism, he states, are

no longer employed "to cover up the real with simulacral surfaces but [to] uncover it in uncanny things, which are often put into performance as well" (*Disgust* 85, 87; Foster's emphasis).

For Foster the image screen only serves as a protection from the powerful, harmful gaze. In his essay about the "real thing," the screen is not the place of a mediation of laws and rules or their role in the visual exchanges between subject and object. This screen, however, is (still) the one place where we can find out something about how Sherman's earlier characters are produced and, more recently, how she sexualizes representation, how the ob-scene is organized in the *Sex Pictures*, if they involve the obscene at all. In Foster's assessment, the difference between 'proper' genitalia and genitalia as props suddenly disappears. He also makes no distinction between the staging of possible sexual positions (*Untitled #255*) under a likely male gaze, alluding to their use in the representative centerfolds of porno-magazines—which Cindy Sherman had already been exploring in her *Centerfold* series in 1981 (for example *Untitled #93*, 1981)—and the much more fictive sex acts not deploying the 'really' naked body, but the 'reality' of the gendered mechanisms of the otherwise natural medical dummies in works like *Untitled #263*. Foster's interpretation deprives these differences of their critical function in the cultural framework of sexual difference. Since the real has a strong unifying tendency, as Deleuze put it in his study about structuralism,¹⁰ it puts off the critical potential of thinking in differences,¹¹ it can hardly be a critical category, especially not in face of the still hierarchical power field of gender relations, sexual politics, and their representations.

Foster thus expands deconstructivist criticisms of the subject to the visual to the point where the binary logic of oppositions dissolves into the unifying effects of the real. The result, however, is the breakdown of criti-

¹⁰ See Deleuze.

¹¹ See Owens' seminal essay (62). Owens uses Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* as his examples (73/75).

cal differences and its substitution by the traumatic (the symptom of the real) as an anthropological or cultural constant.¹²

Surprisingly (or perhaps not so surprisingly), one of Cindy Sherman's talks about her *Sex Pictures* is specifically concerned with the absence of sexuality. She starts out by saying that she really had to force sexual connotations on the body fragments. Even with additional props—the shiny fabrics, fake body parts and masks already familiar from the *History Portraits*, lustrous wigs, so-called erotic accessories as special underwear—it was "hardly possible to produce aggressive or perverse sexual fantasies. There always remained some rest of neutral clinical resistance" Sherman says (qtd. in Dickhoff 64). In her description of making sexual imagery, the observation that she achieves her desired results only by force is crucial. The organic body, sexuality and desire—for example, the desire to achieve an image that will be read as pornographic or, at least, in the context of the PorNo debate—appear separate from one another, reminiscent of Michel Foucault's strategic isolation of sexual desire, body and pleasure to make sexuality more resistant to power.

Difference #4: Economy and the Naked

Sometimes, Cindy Sherman also shifts the focus of the *Sex Pictures* and her participation in the censorship debate to aspects of money, of economy, and of cultural power: "In a way," she says,

I thought that since less successful artists can't depend on getting funded anymore to do their work if they have sexual themes in it, the more successful artists should be the ones that make the more difficult work, if they want to. Nobody can cut my funding . . . The worst that would happen to me is that work might be censored, perhaps out of shows. I can afford to make work that nobody will buy, or show, or like. (qtd. in Wallach 77)

At least in this context, without saying a single word about the iconography of her dummies and what they do or don't do, Cindy Sherman transfers the subject matter to the question of (cultural and material) capital

¹² Cf. Foster, *Return* 171-203.

emphasizing the economical aspects of pornography where sexuality is dominated by a relation of commercial exchange. She simply speaks about selling or not selling, which in her case means that she *can afford* working on themes that may not sell well or not even sell at all. I understand her statement as a probably unconscious problematization of the differences between the social economy of sexuality and art or pornography and the different status of the objects involved as consumer items or commodities. But in addition, she also feels a certain responsibility towards less wealthy artists and the social role of art—the private and the public are neither economically nor sexually or at least libidinally independent from one another.

Thus, Sherman makes clear that the difference between pornography and art—and between the naked and the nude—is not the main theme, or the subject, but rather the different economical and distributional processes the images as cultural products are engaged in. The circulation of desire no longer takes place through the representation of fictive sex acts, but, inverted, through their circulation in a libidinal economy between the artist and the public: to produce the art and to have fun with its making (Sherman quite often stresses that aspect of her work), to show, to like, perhaps even to love the works, to sell them, and to be acknowledged by the public. Or even the opposite: to make works that will not be shown, will be disliked, even censored and not bought. This is something Sherman can afford financially as well as libidinally, despite her and every other artists' desire to be represented and recognized in the culture at large.

In a way, my essay has repeated the trope of the fragmentation of the body that is present in Cindy Sherman's *Sex Pictures*. The artist began with two or three complete plastic dummies, as she declared in one of the interviews (Jocks 234), her intention was to do 'new' work on the seemingly exhausted terrain of the nude. In the end, she was left with the well-worn fragments of artificial body parts, no longer useful for any representation. At the beginning, there was the *theme* of the nude, and its development over the centuries; but if at the conclusion, the naked emerges, it is due to the deconstruction of the modes of representation as well as to the

discursive context: Sherman displaced the human or natural body by dummies, she then dissected this artificial body and staged it within different genres, ranging from the classical nude to pornography, always in relation to photographic techniques like the close-up. Thus, the prosthetic stagings have no single pictorial space; the boundaries between image and mode of observation are constantly threatened to blur, diverted by the shiny material or wigs that fill up the entire space of the images. In most of the motifs, the depth of the image doesn't provide a visible ground on which the sex acts could take place. As I have illustrated in a number of examples, the naked and the sexual in this way turn into a strangely slippery figure of permanent displacement. And although the naked bodies and the sexual scenarios suggested by their fragments and their composition appear out of control and incoherent, they still can become subject to and censored by the power of normative sexuality, even where there are only so few recognizable signs of human genitalia and their arrangement, like in the surreal union of two waists (#253) or the cunnilingus by a screwed-off head (#263). What is conspicuous in the *Sex Pictures* is that any fantasy of private or even intimate sexual consummation—which after all is suggested by the lure of pornography—is immediately blended into the social and cultural codes of public images of pornography, i.e. images of sexuality devoid of fantasy and merely mechanical.

For Sherman, these codes also include historical modes of the representation of the nude which are informed by a voyeuristic gaze, like for instance Édouard Manet's scandalous *Olympia* of 1863. Sherman's reconstruction (*Untitled* #264) as a sadomasochist scenario follows the method of the *History Portraits*, to reconfigure a canonical image within the framework of contemporary discussions of representational strategies and gender difference. The rather graphic arrangement suggests however that Sherman also wanted to re-visualize the embittered debate around the image in its own time.¹³ The display of the mask and the gaping vagina clearly aim to reformulate the problematic question of the gaze—and its

¹³ Cf. Bernheimer and Clark.



Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #264*, 1992.
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

defensive counter by the gaze of the prostitute Olympia—with contemporary means. And there is also a marked parallel between the look of Manet's model which had been sneered at as merely a "working girl," with its 'dirty' and 'liveless' looks, and Sherman's deployment of 'used' parts like plastic breasts, masks, and heads (Sherman qtd. in Jocks 234). Finally it should be noted, that Sherman's *Sex Pictures* might even be said to remain within the boundaries of conventional sexuality since they do not display any extraordinary or even perverse setups, and despite their clear artificiality still follow the logic of

heterosexual arrangements and representations of male and female figures, single and in pairs. If interpreted in psychological terms, however, the sexuality presented by these couples and single figures is characterized as futile, or even ridiculous. This clearly runs counter to the staging of sensuality, sexual attraction and prowess in commercial pornography, but also to the highly aestheticized bodies of Robert Mapplethorpe's nudes, informed by a male gaze whose object of desire is the male body.¹⁴ The vigorous defense of the 'classical beauty' of Mapplethorpe's nudes finally helped to bring down charges of obscenity brought forward by state officials lifting the ban on the images' public exhibition.

¹⁴ An exhibition of Mapplethorpe's images called *The Perfect Moment* is said to have launched the culture wars in 1989.

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WENDY STEINER

The Necessity of Pornography

What I can say about the necessity of pornography has a distinctly circumstantial ring. Throughout history, as far as we know, nudity, sexuality, and commodified sex have always been present in art, sometimes openly and sometimes clandestinely. Such imagery, as well, crops up in the earliest instances of every new art form—photography, film, the internet. And despite millennia of repressive customs, campaigns, and laws, pornography has flourished and continues to flourish. All this does not prove that porn is "necessary" in a philosophical sense, of course, but we might infer a certain human stake in the subject.

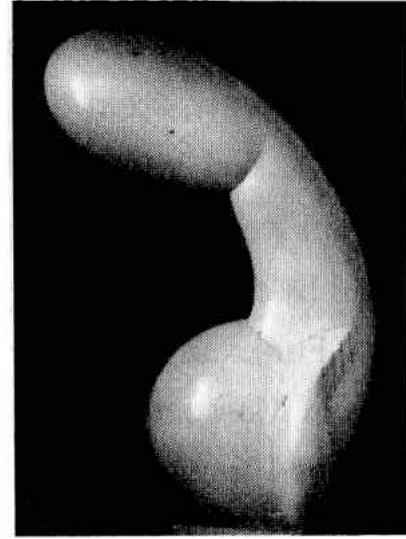
We also know, from the excellent scholarship of Walter Kendrick and Lynn Hunt, that what is identified as pornography constantly changes. Pornography names a concept not a thing, as Kendrick stated;¹ the objects governed by the concept vary drastically, but the concept has a remarkable tenacity. For example, greenery once camouflaged the genitalia of Adam and Eve in Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden*, but our modern mores have cleaned it away. Titian's *Danaë* was originally meant for private delectation; now it is proudly displayed at public expense. Fragonard paints a young man looking up the skirt of a pretty lady in *The Swing* and no one bats an eyelash, though if a contemporary painter showed the same scene he or she might incur accusations of voyeurism and female objectification. Or maybe not: this very picture appears on stage in the musical *Contact*, extended into a racy dance narrative that has won much critical praise.

¹ Pornography "is not a thing but a concept, a thought structure that has changed remarkably little since the name was first applied to it a century and a half ago. 'Pornography' names an imaginary scenario of danger and rescue, a perennial little melodrama in which, though new players have replaced old, the parts remain much as they were first written" (Kendrick xiii).

We could go on citing images previously decried as obscene and now loved, or vice versa. Ingres' *La Source*, for example, depicts a nude so young that questions of child pornography might be expected to arise in our day, except that they never do with this admired allegory. Even Courbet's woman in *La Femme aux bas blancs*, whose genitalia are bared directly in our line of vision, is cited among nineteenth-century pictorial masterpieces. One of the versions of Brancusi's sculpture *Princess X* was refused entry by a U. S. customs official in 1922; it is hard nowadays to discern specifically what he saw in it that was so offensive. And of course, the Nazis' charges of obscenity and transgression aimed at a Beckman self-portrait, Nolde's sunflowers, or a Picasso nude—all featured in the Degenerate Art Exhibition—seem to our eyes to have little if any relation to the paintings themselves.



Gustave Courbét, *La Femme aux bas blanc*, ca. 1861.



Constantin Brancusi, *Princess X*, 1918. © VG Bildkunst, Bonn 2002.

However, variable and unstable as pornography has historically been, the twentieth-century avant-garde made it necessary in a new way. They made it necessary to art. The avant-garde, guided by the requirement of Kant's disinterested interest, attempted to eliminate impure appeals in art, such as comfort, charm, warmth, attraction, empathy. Since these rejected virtues were typically identified with woman, the female subject in art underwent a violent transformation in meaning from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, falling from a supreme symbol of beauty to an



Willem de Kooning, *Woman III*, 1952-53. © Willem de Kooning Revocable Trust/VG-Bildkunst, Bonn 2002.

object lesson in aesthetic discipline. In the classic images of twentieth-century painting—Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Magritte's *La Belle Captive*, de Kooning's endless series, *Woman*—the female subject was transformed from a sensuous object of desire analogous to art to a formal construction. Art was to be an experience of psychic freedom rather than seduction, a freedom guaranteed by the purity of form, and the female subject was literally remade as form in modernist works of painting.

Under the circumstances, the inclusion of exoticism and fetish in avant-garde art, Picasso's *Demoiselles*, for example, was a bravura touch. The modernist could demonstrate his invulnerability to the impure by presenting desire and power and emotion as a primitivism that he had yoked to his formalist purposes. The African mask or oceanic sculpture was someone else's impurity—mysterious, enigmatic, awesome, but not 'ours.' The artist stood above all that. However, he could appreciate its 'honesty' and 'spontaneity,' its absolute contrast to bourgeois convention, and therefore he was eager to incorporate it in his work. His mastery was confirmed when he took primitive avatars of chaos and passion and integrated them into a challenging formal composition.

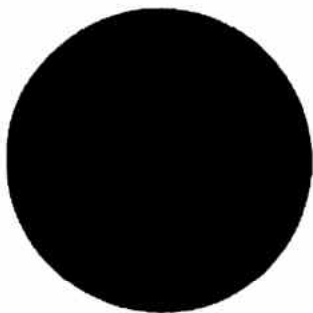
But why not take this brinksmanship a step further? Why not journey to the very heart of impurity to bring back the formal treasure? The logic of the avant-garde led ineluctably to the obscene, the pornographic, the abject. The most path-breaking works of high modernism almost always struck their first audiences as shocking or obscene. Kant and Sade seemed to egg each other on in the forward march of the avant-garde.

The *Demoiselles*, for example, typically identified as the beginning of modern art, depicts a brothel. There was nothing new in that; Ingres and

Degas had done the same. What was new was that Picasso topped some of his prostitutes' shoulders with African masks—exotic religious fetishes—and placed them in a setting impossible to integrate as three-dimensional reality. In the process, the painting connected prostitute with savage, and merged the depersonalizing gaze of the brothel client with the invulnerable, formal gaze of the painter or viewer. In looking at this work, we do not register the trespass and allure of the prostitutes, but instead a disorienting spatiality and a mysterious exoticism.

Our invulnerability in the presence of sexual allure is a modernist adaptation of the Kantian sublime. Picasso was setting viewers a rationalist lesson, showing them sexualized women but making them see instead a problem in cultural and spatial relations. His friend Guillaume Apollinaire, a poet and proponent of cubism who earned his living as a pornographer, equated modernism explicitly with the sublime and predicted that Sade would become "the dominant figure of the 20th century" (Shattuck 31). In many ways, Apollinaire was prophetic, as Magritte's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* reveals.

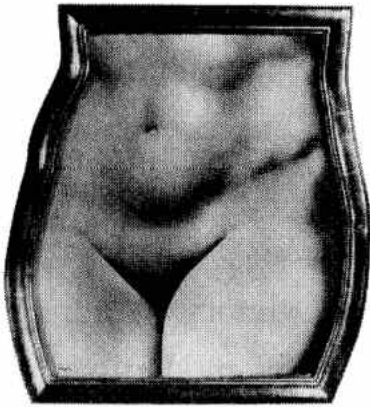
The public frequently did not realize that they were to see *through* transgression to form, but stopped at the transgression. Though Picasso's painting did not meet with violence or censorship, many other modernist masterpieces did: Stravinsky's and Diaghilev's *Rite of Spring*; James Joyce's *Ulysses*; D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It took photography somewhat longer to enter legal history, since its claim to the status of high art was for so long questionable, but eventually Robert Mapplethorpe's classicist renderings of gay sado-masochism provoked the textbook court decision for the arts of mechanical reproduction.



Kasimir Malevich, *Black Circle on a White Ground*, early 1920s.

We might wonder about the odd dialogue between art and obscenity in the twentieth century. Certainly, the most direct product of Kantian aesthetics—geometric abstractions such as Malevich's *Black Circle on a White Ground*—is devoid of pornographic taint, an art of pure

form that protects viewers from any hint of an interested response, never mind a libidinous one. Abstraction was an extreme case though, dependent on a purity on the part of artist and viewer that struck many people as simplistic and ultimately unrewarding. The vast majority of modernists created a much more complicated problem for their audience, a kind of dare: "Read *this* as art—Duchamp's *Fountain*—or *this*—Magritte's *Representation*—or *this*—Duchamp's *Etant donné*." The ante kept rising as



René Magritte, *La Représentation*, 1937. © VG-Bildkunst, Bonn 2002.

to what traps and confusions could be placed in the path of the perceiver of art. In effect, the audience was faced with a dilemma: a sublime uplift that felt like sterility, or a shock or lubricity that were supposed to be beside the point. The audience that could discern beauty while being tweaked in these ways was the modernist audience par excellence. Indeed, Picasso's *Demoiselles* was such a paradigmatic work for modernism because it laid out the

elements of this 'prostitutional sublime,' as we might call it: the temptation to respond to allure or any emotional appeal in art; the equation of that allure with primitivism; the transformation of the interested gaze of the voyeuristic brothel client judging feminine allure into the removed gaze of a connoisseur judging formal excellence and hence triumphing over that temptation to chaos.

In this way, the *Demoiselles* set back the brave direction of Manet's *Olympia*, a nude who looks knowingly back at her observer. Picasso could wipe his women out as subjects, whereas the best efforts of moralists and critics for the past 135 years have not been able to do the same to *Olympia*. The public's frenzied hostility to this painting was extreme in its day and critics still treat it as an anomaly—a realistic nude. Zola's attempt to rescue it by declaring that its subject was *form* was a founding moment in modernist thinking, not lost upon Picasso. But the strategy never really worked, because *Olympia*'s realism and the directness of her gaze undid a purely formal interpretation, just as they did a century later for Mapplethorpe's

self portrait with a bull whip stuck up his anus. Expert witnesses in the trial seemed laughable when they argued for the purely formal excellence of such shocking images. The questionable 'achievement' of the avant-garde was to present transgressive subjects—often women—whom its audience could 'look through' to get to form. Only recently have artists begun to insist that we stop engaging in this x-ray vision, but by now we are so accomplished at it that we have trouble imagining how else to see.

This procedure has turned the reception history of modern art into a repetitive farce, each episode of which typically begins with outrage concerning some shocking subject matter packaged in unprecedented formal means, and ends with an act of aesthetic mystification: the taming, denaturing, and stilling of threat by the calming discovery of form. It is a little allegory of the Enlightenment's triumph—a cold victory by our day. In the shrill, scandalous, often *unenlightening* history of modernism, the rewarding values of aesthetic experience—communication, mutuality, understanding—are seldom in evidence. Instead, attention has been focussed on social fault lines, differences in belief and behavior dramatized by sublime scandal.

Artists still feel they must shock and audiences in the know feel they must applaud shock. The thrill of repulsion at some unassimilable Other has become a positive and sought-after experience in itself, an exercise of freedom, a nihilistic sublime in which horror, disgust, and lack of sympathy are accepted ends. To transform the latest challenge into art does not involve a victory of fellow feeling among members of an interpretive community but a proud gesture of superiority on the part of experts toward lay people supposedly incapable of such feats of stamina and discernment. Moreover, insofar as those in society who are officially labeled as Other—women, minorities, immigrants, the insane, the disadvantaged, the poor—learn their situation by analogy to art, the lesson has been chilling. In this model, an Other can only be colonized or expelled, denatured or killed.

To some degree, one might object, the lurching from outrage to acceptance is the reception history of all art. Even Impressionism was considered scandalous in its day, whereas now it is quite uncontroversial.

But it is the pace and violence of the shock-redemption-assimilation plot in the twentieth century that has been new. Locked in this pattern, artists feel they are not making art unless they keep generating new moral challenges, and the public is equally trapped. "Is this pornography or art?" the question phrases itself, and not, "Why do I like or fear art or pornography—or women or gays, for that matter?" Art as modernism conceived it has become dependent on the contrast to pornography, and the whole drama of twentieth-century aesthetics has consisted in the discovery of arguments to undermine the allure of art and shore up the independence and invulnerability of the interpreter. It has proved a pyrrhic victory, I think, for all concerned.

Let me explain this claim through personal anecdote. After my book, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, was published, I gave talks in museums and universities, presenting a standard liberal account of artistic freedom of expression. When I would discuss the Mapplethorpe trial and show slides of the infamous *X Portfolio*, with its extreme images of homosexual sadism and abjection, some members of the audience would always register shock or discomfort. But lately, if viewers are shocked or offended, they do not show it. The challenges instead come from audience members interested in hearing a case made for pornography but impatient with my examples. "Everyone knows Mapplethorpe is art," they object. "Let's talk about 'real porn.'" Some aesthetic alchemy has taken hold. Mapplethorpe's images—however deeply forearm burrows into rectum or urine arcs into mouth—have metamorphosed into 'art,' and once this change has occurred, they seem to be morally neutral—unassailable, uncontroversial, and irrelevant to a discussion of pornography. They are no longer 'real porn.'

In the eyes of the public, art is high and pornography is low. 'Real porn' is commercial; it keeps decorously in its place—subliterary, subaesthetic, and highly profitable. It is those dangerous category-jumpers—Joyce, Lawrence, Nabokov, Mapplethorpe—who fill up headlines for a while, only to settle righteously into their status as classics of art. Dirt is dirt; art is art—until we go through the next paroxysm of shock and redemption. Every time a critic argues that a scandalous work is in fact an artistic tri-

umph, and every time an audience or the courts are won over to this point of view, a moment in the unceasing revision of the category 'art' has taken place. Garbage in, art out; garbage in, art out. If this is the way to redeem the wasteland, redemption will be never-ending.

However, what looks like a category drama ("is this art or porn?") is in fact a disguised debate over value. The question is not: "Is this art?" though we are conditioned to ask it this way. *Ulysses* and *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* and *Debbie Does Dallas* are all works of art, but they are not equally good art. It is crucial to realize, though, that bad art is still art and good pornography is still pornography. The avant-garde seem to deny this. The message of their high-art transgressions is: "This is not pornography (which is bad) but art (which is good)." In the process, 'good' and 'bad' are no longer aesthetic but moral terms, and aesthetic 'goodness'—beauty—drops out of discussion altogether. We hardly know how to talk about it anymore, except through an embarrassed resort to formalism. The avant-garde hides beauty under a smokescreen of moral scandal, and ties the very definition of art to pornography. To be art is to be recognized as 'not pornography.'

At the same time, the line between the two can be thrillingly slight. We might consider Camus' rendition of the myth of Sisyphus, perhaps the archetypal parable of the modernist condition. Sisyphus' eternal punishment, we recall, is to push a boulder up a hill in Hades. Invariably, it falls back down when it reaches the summit, requiring Sisyphus' painful efforts in another pointless push. His heroism lies in his acceptance of this meaningless struggle as his inescapable fate. However, what if we recast the myth ever so slightly? What if Sisyphus were forced to reach orgasm and then come down, knowing that he would only have to reach it and come down again and ever again? Existential absurdity and the structure of pornography have a lot in common. As a genre, porn is ideally suited to a world devoid of value, meaning, and grounded truth, in which pleasure is merely unsustainable sensation, endlessly and pointlessly repeated.

Historians such as Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacobs remind us that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pornographic heroines from *Thérèse*

philosophe to Sade's *Justine* expound materialist philosophy in their bedrooms, and that these transgressive fictions were frequently bound in with materialist treatises in volumes smuggled across European borders. Like materialism, early pornography glorified the liberated individual unconstrained by convention or authority, free to experience pleasure without guilt, to indulge the curiosity and obsessiveness of a scientist in the exploration of the senses. At the same time, it entailed a leveling and depersonalizing rigor—an objectivity in which it was inappropriate to discriminate among bodies, all equally interesting as interchangeable holes and plugs. Pornography suspends value and preference in favor of novelty and variety; its plot is an additive sequence of equivalent encounters rather than a directed progression toward a unique culmination.

Despite its Kantian idealism, the ideology of much modernism is materialist to the core. It presents artistic value as lying in form, since form is ideal, free of contingency and practical 'interest.' Yet, as the expressionist Wassily Kandinsky saw, there is a paradox in this claim. He argued that "The artist must have something to communicate, since mastery over form is not the end but, instead, the adapting of form to internal significance" (798). If the artist does not have this imperative to communicate, then the work is a mere thing, an object, and as such, it is part of a materialist ethos. "At those times when the soul tends to be choked by materialist lack of belief," Kandinsky wrote, "art becomes purposeless, and it is said that art exists for art's sake alone." This materialism collapses value and alienates the artist from his audience, "until at last the public turns its back, or regards the artist as a juggler whose skill and dexterity alone are worthy of applause" (798). Kandinsky's words are a diagnosis of the communicative malaise of much twentieth-century art. Despite its claims for the ideality of formal beauty, modernism achieved all too often an alienated freedom, a sensationalism implicit in Apollinaire's 'sublime,' the logical response to which is merely the call for more of the same.

Under the pressure of Kant's 'disinterested interest,' the avant-garde's hostility to its bourgeois audience, and the misogyny built into this aesthetics, pornography was constructed as the inverse of high art rather than

a possibility within it. This opposition is an inextricable element of modernism: *Philosophy in the Boudoir* the shadowy underside of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. As a result, aesthetic value has been hidden in morality and we are locked in a meaningless cycle of shock and rehabilitation and new shock. Modernism's reading of Kant must be undone if we are ever to move on, for what has been fenced off into the fetish realm of pornography—desire, allure, charm, sexuality—is necessary to art, however much denied in the official statements of the avant-garde. It is time that we recognized the necessity of pornography *in* art, and not as a lesser sphere beyond it—that we become willing at last to confront Olympia's and Mapplethorpe's gazes and acknowledge that we like looking back.

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