

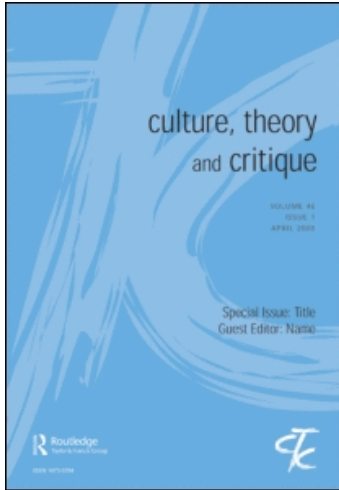
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What Do Drawings Want?

Michael Taussig



Antony Gormley, ORIGIN OF DRAWING I, 2008, © the artist.

Abstract *The idea the pictures want something evokes the belief that pictures are spirits, that they represent what J. G. Frazer called 'sympathetic magic'. The colonial response was to be suspicious of any such claim and regard it as a superstition held by the backward and the colonised, but dismissed by us advanced Westerners. This is the issue that W. J. T. Mitchell's most recent work plays with. This paper addresses these issues by explicitly taking up the question of drawing. Engaging with the writings of John Berger, and in response to the distinct lack of drawing by anthropologists, the paper asks what role does this sympathetic magic play when we actually make a picture. What can the act of drawing tell us about what pictures want?*

W. J. T. Mitchell follows up his earlier book on picture theory (1994) with this new book on pictures as alive (2005). The first book edged 'the linguistic turn' aside so as to make room for 'the pictorial turn' acknowledging the curious and overwhelming power pictures play in our thinking and in the cultural landscape worldwide. The title of the second book, *What Do Pictures Want?*, would seem to go a good deal further than any literary turn. Reflecting the untrammelled love most of us have for the image, to ask *What Do Pictures Want?* suggests that pictures are aware of this love and that, like spirits of the dead, have the potential to come alive in strange and lovely ways so as to haunt the living. What these ways are is the subject matter of the various essays enclosed therein and what especially grabs my eye is the author's strategy, if not conviction, that in the modern Western world it helps to think of pictures as alive because they are caught in a cruel and fascinating trap.

On the one hand pictures are in some obscure way reacted to as magical entities with a claim to what they represent, what Frazer of *The Golden Bough* called sympathetic magic, meaning essentially that pictures take power from

what they are of and, furthermore, can be meddled with so as to change what they are a picture of. This can take bizarre forms. Marcel Proust, for example, who rarely lost the chance to pour scorn on the value of photos in his great novel as they didn't get anywhere close to the *mémoire involontaire* (the ultimate in sympathetic magic), was said to obtain sexual pleasure spitting on the photographs of his mother – just like the two lesbians in his novel enjoyed having one of them spitting on the photograph of her father. Proust himself loved Vermeer's paintings and more than once described his style as based on Vermeer, converting them into turning points to death in his novel, as when he has a great writer – and here I wish to emphasise the writerly in tight connection with painting – bemoan that his books did not live up to the art of that Dutch artist and then in a swoon of ecstatic adoration went down with what seems like a heart attack and died. Not only are pictures alive as per Mitchell, but they can be killers as well.

On the other hand, and what makes the cruel and fascinating trap a trap is that this feeling of a mystical bond is simultaneously regarded in the modern West as superstition, over the top hysterical fabulation, a mystical short-cut to what patient psychoanalysis or just plain analysis will elucidate. We are still waiting.

One way out of this trap is colonialism, and its successor and continuation known as post-colonialism, the idea being that while *they* have sympathetic magic, *we* do not.

How disturbing to think otherwise!

Which is what Mitchell's new book plays with.

Christian Metz had an ingenious suggestion. Surveying the messy polemics around the question as to whether those first viewers of film really did flee when they beheld a locomotive coming at them head-on in late nineteenth-century Paris, Metz opined it didn't really matter whether they fled or not. The crucially important thing was the story and why we loved to tell it; that we latecomers to the movies can look back and laugh and be intrigued by that possibility that the first-timers took the picture for real. We can *believe and disbelieve* at the same time, have our cake and eat it too. It is a story – the story – we never tire of telling.

Presumably we play this game all the time but are less than honest about such play, whether we be primitives, colonial subjects, children, or beings blessed with adult consciousness as to what is and what is not. We all walk on a thin crust of reality under which lurks the hocus pocus swamp. As Metz points out, we have to believe and disbelieve at the same time. In that regard I recall Joseph Bueys cavorting fully and more than fully clothed in the bogs of the Netherlands as if he was doing just what I describe, taking a dip in the hocus pocus swamp. In and out. In and out. Swamps are where the greatest concentration of life-forms are to be found. Or else picture the child Walter Benjamin envisions in his mind's eye as disappearing into the picture in illustrated children's books, thanks to the picture's colour. There is another picture to conjure with as well, not child oriented so much as childish, and that is the picture of the professor berating his students for their naiveté in actually believing there is a non-arbitrary bond tying signifier to signified. The quotient of sarcasm, if not downright sadism, hereby manifest, is testimony to the deep seated anxiety that maybe our 'error' in this regard

is actually highly useful, as Nietzsche would be among the first of professors to point out.

Which brings me to consider not what we see and think we see when looking at pictures, but what part sympathetic magic plays *when you actually make one*? What do we learn about *What Pictures Want?* when we make a picture? This would seem helpful, indeed very helpful, because the position of this type of viewer – this maker-viewer – is at once intimate and personal yet bears the obligation to make something that exceeds the personal. It's like a three way conversation is going on between the drawer, the thing drawn, and the hypothetical viewers.

This perspective struck me forcibly when I discovered what is for me a new genre – drawings in ethnographic fieldwork notebooks, namely my own and, on reflection, what little I could find of such drawings by other anthropologists and fellow travellers – such as Allen Ginsberg's hallucinations of The Great Being and The Vomiter in the jungles of Peru in Burroughs and Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters* (1967), William James in the Amazon, Sylvia Plath in Spain and Smith College, A. H. Haddon of Cambridge University writing letters in the late nineteenth century to his young son from the Torres Straits, Tom Harrison's drawings in his tear-away, oddball, and some say 'surrealist' book concerning the island of Malekula in the south Pacific in the late 1920s, Freud's Wolf Man's drawing of his dream (although Freud ignores the drawingness of the drawing), and of course (!) my own drawings as in *My Cocaine Museum* (2004), *Law in a Lawless Land* (2003), and my shamanism book (1987), all lifted straight from my fieldwork notebooks. As for the value of these drawings, I have vivid memories of the copy editor of the publishing house writing to me in connection with my shamanism book, 'I fail to see what these add to the text'. Years later Elizabeth Branch-Dyson, now an editor in the same press, actually twisted my arm to include such drawings and even make a cover of one of them. And so it goes.

Related but not at all the same are drawings that may have been made in diaries and fieldwork notebooks, but appear to have undergone a transformation in status felt to be required for publication, such as the many drawings of Dahomey shrines and similar objects in the margins of Melville and Jean Herskovits 1938 two volume book on Dahomey, Claude Lévi-Strauss' smoothly realist drawings of ox-cart wheels, penis sheaths, and Caduveo women's face paintings in *Tristes Tropiques*, and the ultra-realist (if that's the term) full-page drawings in Philippe Descola's *The Spears of Twilight*, the clinical exactitude of which seems to contradict the very idea of drawing.

But to get to basics, why draw? Why not take a photo instead, as I often do? And what is the difference between these two modes of picture making, or is it taking? Common language use would describe the photo as a *taking*, the drawing as a *making*, and there is wisdom in that. John Berger certainly thinks so with his notion that a *photograph stops time*, while a *drawing encompasses it* – and this from a writer who has published a lot of photographs by Jean Mohr alongside text, as in his studies of guest workers in Europe (1975) and of French peasants (1999).

Yet there is this other and less known Berger who seems to spend an inordinate amount of time drawing as well. To read him on drawing is to be

struck by the intimacy he feels between the drawer and the thing drawn. The attachment to photographs pales by comparison.

And why bother making a picture anyway, any type of picture? Why not just write words and leave it at that? After all, I would guess that the majority of ethnographies published in the past century have no pictures whatsoever and when they do, as they famously do with say Malinowski and Evans Pritchard, the commentary by the photographer, the exegetes and critics, is embarrassingly thin. Never lost for words and especially good at 'painting' landscapes by means of words, Malinowski is said to have hated taking photographs at which he felt he was bad. Nevertheless, he spent much time stalking around the village taking and developing photographs, as testified by his diary and the large number of photographs in his ethnographies. My sense is that, as Victor Turner once remarked about the value of taking down genealogies and working with questionnaires, such photography gave the bored ethnographer something to do so as to stay awake and structure the long hot days, while also establishing his status as a magician and technician (in those days the film was developed in a makeshift dark-room on the spot).

Yet by and large for over one hundred years there has been a discreet visual silence, embarrassment all around, it seems, and perhaps some inexplicable fear of the image as with universities such as my own which long resisted until very recently the use of film in teaching other than in the School of the Arts. Yet photography played an important ideological role in making ethnography appear scientific, as with biology professor Baldwin Spencer and postmaster Frank Gillen's foundational ethnographies of central and northern Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century, and as with Malinowski himself, always ready to bash mere amateurs who may have strayed in their unscientific way into the science of man. Evans-Pritchard's far more painterly or what might be called aestheticised photographs, even eroticised and very much endowed with Significant Otherness, also appear pretty much without comment, opaque statements at best, reflecting perplexity as to the relationship between text and photograph. Maybe we could say that Evans Pritchard moved on from image as that which affirms science and reserved science for his drawings, of the rubbing oracle, for example, in the Zande witchcraft book, while the photos spoke to quite other dimensions of the fieldwork experience. In any event, looking at the discipline as a whole, through its books and articles, it seems that picturing gets short shrift because of awkwardness as to what it is that pictures want. (By contrast, ethnographic film never faltered in its self-confidence. A pity.)

My interest however is restricted to a small slice of all of this – to drawings made in fieldwork notebooks – drawings that rarely if at all make it into published accounts, drawings that may be larded with all manner of textual exegesis in and around the drawing precisely because it is the text-image hybrid that is here the core of the procedure. It was William Burroughs' early 1960s scrap-books in the form of diaries that alerted me to the wider possibilities fieldwork notebooks could acquire as my own notebooks were, in an impoverished and tentative manner, moving in that direction anyway. Reading – or should I say, more generically, *looking* – at the scrapbook pages included in *Ports of Entry*, the catalogue of a Burroughs' art show at the Los Angeles County Museum, was a real turn-on as it resonated with what I, and

I suspect many other people, were to some limited extent doing without knowing that's what they were doing. The fieldwork notebook thus veered abruptly from a scientifically oriented daily account to an avant-garde oneiric montage of images and dis-assembled poetic texts combined with utterly objective (you know what I mean) scraps such as newspaper cuttings and straight reportage on events and things ranging from murder to cooking recipes. (In fact I think there is a lot of hype concerning Burroughs' scrapbooks. Lacking further research I think it fair to say that there were in fact few pages dedicated to such, yet all his work, life-long, was one vast scrapbook.)

Burroughs expressed wild ambitions for this procedure. Placing family photographs, cut-out images from American comic books of the 1940s and 1950s, eerie images of what caught his eye, odd newspaper clippings, together with slabs of prose (if that be the word) that he was writing at the time, pithy asides, and trails of color, all dividing up the page into two or three vertical columns with the day's date at the top, like a diary, he wanted this collage to do cultural anthropological work, manipulating the political unconscious so as to wage war on the status quo.

Thus described this is a more artistic, more interesting, and far less likely to succeed procedure than anthropology *per se*. And because it adheres to the form of the field diary – outwardly at least – and thus gives the impression of rawness and proximity to events, it holds out the promise of a more true and more vivid first reaction of a stranger in the field of the unknown. To this I have to add immediately that the power of this procedure lies very much in its mix of image and text in a way that scorches across personal history as well as popular culture.

This is to dance a complex dance moving with, yet also against, the current, because of the way we unconsciously grant the word more power than the image one minute, and next minute do the opposite. Burroughs is a writer who seems never happier than when he has images flowing through his sentences, if sentences they be. What's more he allows pictures to creep into his stories as magical beings, like those colour-filled comic book pictures he writes about in *Cities of the Red Night*. All his work could thus be thought of as a tenuous management of words by pictures and vice versa. What is more he, too, tried his hand at painting, inspired by his close friend the painter Brion Gysin, who made coloured pictures out of Arabic and Chinese letters as if not only letters but words and language could be made to metamorphose into non-verbal visual images, or at least hybrid formations, half picture and half word. And both Gysin and Burroughs were resolute in claiming as their aim the erasure of the word as the carrier of codes that control and deform us humans.

Or take Walter Benjamin who repeatedly emphasises the force of words in good Old Testament style with the ban on graven images, yet stretched himself in all manner of startling ways to argue that words had a magical, mimetic, relation to what they stood for. Recall his arguments with the painter Jean Selz in sunny Ibiza summers of 1932 and 1933, with Benjamin claiming that the shape of a written word bore a resemblance to what it meant! After all, this was the same Benjamin who had six years earlier waxed enthusiastic about the ideas of the early nineteenth century writer, Johann Wilhelm Ritter, concerning Chaldini's 'sound figures' made by sand on a

sheet of glass as moved by the touch of different notes of music. This is analogous to the 'writing' of the larynx, shapes making sound such that the sound-pattern is for us internally 'a light-pattern, fire-writing ... every sound would then have its own letter directly to hand ... That inward connection of word to script – so powerful that we write when we speak ... rooted in the fact that the organ of speech itself writes in order to speak' (in Benjamin 1977: 213–14).

Benjamin allowed the pendulum to swing wildly towards images as more important than words and stories. Not only did he advocate strongly for film but more generally for what in an almost sacred tone he called 'the image sphere', which without equivocation he saw as a potentially apocalyptic revolutionary force in his essay on Surrealism. Just as grandiose and just as thrilling was his idea of the *dialectical image* which was, so to speak, waiting there to be plucked out of the flow of time as if history itself was a movie with long and short 'takes', the dialectical image being that particular image which would bring past and present suddenly and unexpectedly together, leap-frogging over all that was in between and thus and thereby initiate a new world.

But before I proceed let me point out that the hiatus or no-man's land between picture and text in the anthropological tradition raises a further question as to the general devaluation of drawing in relation to reading and writing in modern Western cultures and maybe in many other cultures as well. We do everything to get children to read, write, and speak well. But why not draw too? Shortly after I wrote this I drove to the supermarket close to where I live in upstate New York past a sign on the road. It read: 'Summer Reading Camp'.

Even in art schools, so I am told, drawing is having a hard time, being greatly diminished in the past two decades or even curtailed. A friend of mine has fought to retain drawing on the syllabus. Her class in New Jersey is now scheduled to meet at 7:30 a.m. And that was before the hedge funders drove the economy into the ground. It is now fashionable, so I am told, for artists to innocently claim, 'Oh! I can't draw'. (No wonder!)

In the West, drawing is taught as a precursor to writing, something through which the kiddies can 'express themselves', as the saying goes, or else it is cordoned off for those few deemed to have talent. There is a pattern here. It is like a fairytale. At first the child is read to by means of picture books. Gradually captions come into the picture. They get bigger and bigger and the pictures get smaller and smaller until they disappear and the book becomes all text by the time the child is around eight or so. Then one day aged around twelve a surprising thing happens, taking myself as example. Springing out from the pages of the story jumps an illustration. All those words and what seemed like long years of nothing but words in pictureless books until the fateful day when one is face to face with a picture of the hero or heroine or a haunted house or the Good Ship Such and Such. At this point what should have been a pretty smooth path of evolution away from the image is put into shock, even depression, as one senses that one does not see as book illustrators see, to say the least. It is as if I am forced to reckon with the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of the images in my imagination. Those images in the book are not mine and never will be. Treason is the word that comes to mind. Another is socialisation. I learn what society has in mind and I do not approve. The

upward curve over those tender years of displacement and replacement of image by text will never be the same. Instead of being smooth it wobbles. That upward curve remains a possibility but only one among several possibilities and always ready to be sabotaged by the question mark it carries on its back. And into that wobble comes the drawing in the fieldwork notebook.

In this climate it is startling to come across John Berger's passion for drawing and his sharp distinction between drawing and photography. What we learn, if we didn't know it already, is that drawing tends to be a mute conversation with the thing drawn and can involve prolonged and total immersion. You stare and draw and stare again. Back and forth it goes. A quick sketch has a bare minimum of this dialectic, but the more prolonged study can make your body ache from the tension. On life drawing Berger wrote in 1960 (I paraphrase): It is a platitude that what's important in drawing is the process of looking. A line drawn is important not for what it records so much as what it leads you on to see. 'Each confirmation or denial brings you closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become ... a drawing is an autobiographical record of one's discovery of an event, seen, remembered, or imagined' (Berger 2007: 3).

That is one form sympathetic magic can take. Something to bear in mind if one is asked *What Do Pictures Want?*

Another thing to bear in mind is the ghostly absence the drawing fills, the absence that is the blank sheet of paper to begin with, and the absence that is the withdrawal of the thing being drawn. 'The longer you look', writes James Elkins to Berger as they write letters to each other about the act of drawing; 'the more distant and insubstantial the object becomes, and in the end it may even slip down to the bottom of the page and drift away' (Savage 2007: 106, 108). Berger likes this insofar as it reminds him that drawing is one way of addressing the absent and making it appear, a way that is much older than writing or architecture, he opines, as old as song, that inflection of language. (Back to those Chaldini's 'sound figures'?) Indeed 'drawing is as fundamental to the energy which makes us human as singing and dancing' (109). Drawing he adds, has something that painting, sculpture, videos, and installations, lack – corporeality (116).

This 'corporeality' linked to sympathetic magic comes over forcefully with Berger's meditation on drawing his father's face shortly after he died. On another occasion this same idea underlies his discussion about drawing with his son Yves.

In drawing his father's face, he felt like a lifesaver saving a life, in this case by saving a likeness. But what sort of likeness? In the essay published in 1976 he explains: 'As I drew his mouth, his brows, his eyelids, as their specific forms emerged from the whiteness of the paper, I felt the history and the experience which made them as they were' (147).

What is more, once this drawing was hung on the wall, it kept changing. 'My father came back to give the image of his death mask a kind of life' (148).

Then in discussion with his son, Yves, Berger proposes as the opening question, Where are we when we draw? That is, Where are we spiritually?

Yves responds by saying that he feels the process of drawing as something like an electric circuit, that something passes from what he is looking at

back to himself and from there back to the thing looked at. Drawing, replies his father, is more about becoming than being. It is a process of continuous correcting, not unlike children playing, and he wonders whether what he calls the human need for drawing 'may not be a response to the ontological question: where are we?' (Savage 2007: 119–41).

I would like to take up this ontological question in relation to a drawing I made in my notebook in Medellín, Colombia, in 2006. I first showed it to a class of undergraduates in New York City when they asked for clarification of Roland Barthes' enigmatic idea of 'the third meaning' which applies to drawn images as well as those in movies. This meaning, this third meaning, is more like 'the end of meaning', a subversion of meaning understood as a stable, conceptual, sort of thing. That sort of meaning better applies to the information and to the symbolism an image possesses, whereas the third meaning is continuously shifting and undoing its premises. It is the 'something else' that unsettles any composure that the viewer might have as to what is happening with this image and is a sure sign that the picture wants more. The picture wants something, but that something will never ever be gotten right. Allow me to recall John Berger: It is a platitude that what's important in drawing is the process of looking. A line drawn is important not for what it records so much as what it leads you on to see. 'Each confirmation or denial brings you closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become ...'.

My drawing shows people lying down at the entrance to a tunnel by the edge of a freeway which has four lanes of traffic hemmed in by high concrete walls. 'Why do they lie here?' I asked the taxi driver. 'Because it's warm', he replied as we sped into the pitch black tunnel thick with exhaust and the flare of oncoming headlights.

Later that day in red pencil I wrote in my notebook *I Swear I Saw This*.

Two days later I drew the drawing and applied watercolours to it.

When I turn the pages of my notebook, it is this image that leaps out at me. It is the stillness that grabs me most, combined with desperation.

There is a woman (is she a woman?) sewing a man (is he a man?) into a white nylon bag. And she seems to be sewing herself into it as well. The person sewing is becoming the sewn. Similarly the drawing is disappearing into itself. If we were bold enough to impose Barthes' aesthetic category of the third meaning onto this situation we might say that in enclosing herself – for enclosure is the third meaning alongside calm and desperation – in enclosing herself like this she is providing the entry point, like the tunnel, for utter blackness where images gasp for air as much as light.

The man looks like a diver in one of those old fashioned diving helmets. He seems to be looking at us looking at him. It is the look of a person in the vortex and he seems to be asking a question as he disappears from sight. The 'third meaning', claims Barthes, 'compels an interrogative meaning'.

With his ruminations on the third meaning Barthes may not care for this, but I wonder whether this drawing is best thought of as a religious picture, an amulet or icon?

Here I am thinking of Frazer with his concept of *sympathetic magic* which centres on the magic of mimesis. Yet this needs to be revised, perhaps along

the lines Bataille suggests in his study of the drawings on the walls of the Lascaux caves in southern France.

Bataille suggests that the drawings in the caves of Lascaux come after the hunt, not before. They are therefore not magical as Frazer of *The Golden Bough* might have it, image-magic that makes success in the hunt likely. Yet whether before or after, there is much magic involved. With Frazer there is a strong utilitarian assumption. Thanks to the drawing I will eat. With Bataille the image is an homage to the animal depicted. This is what I discern in descriptions of hunters such as the Naskapi of Newfoundland around 1920. After the animal has been killed it is laid on its back, a carrying sling is laid on it, and tobacco put into its mouth (Speck 1978). The killer sits by the animal for around an hour, smoking, attempting to appease the spirit-owner of the animal and the animal's reincarnation. Sometimes he gets up and sings and dances, recalling Berger on drawing as something akin to singing and dancing, something corporeal and very old.

Frazer is right to emphasise mimetic magic – the sense that the picture has an organic bond with what it is a picture of, and as such can effect the reality depicted – and of course this is what pictures want even though they have long been deprived of smoking, dancing, and singing as that which ritual ordains as necessary for mimetic magic to take full effect. Non-figurative art turns its back on this, while conceptual art strives to illustrate the struggle required to evade its grasp.

But Frazer was wrong, I think, to put so much emphasis on utility, on drawing so as to possess whatever the drawing is a drawing of. What is more he does great disservice in relegating this love and desire of mimetic magic to so-called primitive people. This was his crucial mistake as well as those of most of his readers, and, by contrast, what I find salutary in the book before us, *What Do Pictures Want?*

Yet if we combine Frazer's notion of sympathetic magic with Bataille's sense of the need to give witness, then we are a good deal closer to coming up with an answer as to *What Pictures Want* – or – if not that, at least what *my* picture wants.

It is shock that brings these perspectives together, Frazer and Bataille. I sense that my drawing acts *à la* Frazer in providing a measure of control over what was seen, a sort of barrier or zone of mediation, while also providing *à la* Bataille the testimony, the need to mark and serve as witness. Berger's notion of drawing as a means of getting close to and even merging with the object drawn, provides an extremely fraught and yet pure sense of what it is to witness.

Witnessing, in overdrive, is what the note I wrote in my notebook in red pencil implies: *I Swear I Saw This*. For to swear is to claim allegiance to powers beyond empirical reality, which in Colombia, anyway, is at root corrupted by the open secret of the paramilitarisation of everyday reality.

Anthropological fieldwork is rooted in an empiricism of 'being there', young Yves' 'ontological question' (Where are you when you draw?). The whole point of anthropology is to be cast outside of yourself, lose your moorings, and, equally if not even more important, figure out a way – a poetics – of 'translating' this new experience into terms that the reader can latch onto. Ideally this translation is incomplete. It does not dissolve the mystery of the

new and unknown into the certainties of the known, if only because that would detract attention from the real mystery, that of the known. Drawings in fieldwork notebooks along with their attached pieces of text and collage of cuttings and palimpsests of layers of notes atop earlier notes are one way of going about this.

The empiricism of fieldwork is the empiricism of what E. P. Thompson would call lived-experience – a term or concept which Benjamin put hard to work by distinguishing between long-term experience, bound to habit and tradition, from the experience of modern life that shreds experience through shock-effects that focus on and are consumed by the lived instant. The instant of memorisation that goes into *I Swear I Saw This* as the taxi rushes along the freeway into the tunnel must be an exquisitely painful example of the latter. To record this by means of a drawing is the desperation of the need to hold onto a memory as it flashes up only to die away – a precise instantiation of the working of the mimetic faculty as Benjamin parlayed that faculty in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’.

The drawing I present is like a still-life or *nature morte* as the French call it; *dead nature*, perfect for the idea of the fossil as that which congeals time thanks to some convulsive heave in the earth millions of years ago. Because of what I see and feel as its stillness and because of its sense of enclosedness, this drawing does what Berger describes because unlike a photograph it encompasses time.

Adorno presented a formula for this when he tried to sum up Benjamin’s style as the need to become a thing in order to break with the catastrophic spell of things (1983). Is this what this drawing wants too? On the one hand, coagulation into the grip of thinghood. On the other hand, and as a result, the utopian and electrifying escape into flight and freedom because of the spell that breaks the spell. This is what Benjamin refers to as ‘weakly messianic’ in his famous ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. To use some lofty phraseology, this is the movement inherent to a post-Enlightenment strategy of demystification *and* re-enchantment.

Enchantment? This is and must be the goal of any analysis worth its salt. Brecht’s political aesthetic was built on astonishment which must be the secular equivalent. But what sort of enchantment? In this picture and the story it so badly wants told there is a type of holiness present, as in the dark calm of a church or a temple. But by the freeway and the tunnel this is the sacred of the negative, the negative that in other places, such as that of the dead animal in Naskapi-land or the human corpse in the Christian cemetery, may well pass into the realm of the master of the animals or the positive sacred of the church’s interior. But here by the freeway it seems unlikely that the man in the nylon bag will emerge. I fear we are left without redemption, just the *erlebnis*, the experience that shatters experience, the lived instant.

When one writes in red pencil *I Swear I Saw This*, it seems to me that what the picture wants is recognition that one is actually, and pathetically, soliciting spirits – that when one draws or writes as I am doing right now, one’s first port of call are the spirits whom Enlightenment has tried so hard to bury, whether they be spirits of the dead – ubiquitous in these peasant cultures – or spirits of the river and the forest from where these displaced peasants have been driven. And then of course we have all these new spirits, those of the

freeway and of the dark tunnels and bridges, and of the thousands assassinated by the paramilitaries now lying in mass graves or dumped in the Cauca and Magdalena rivers, what Martin Heidegger in his essay on building, dwelling, and thinking called 'the fourfold' constellation of earth and sky, mortals and divinities. Yet this fourfold is not a relapse into an older language of spirits. Instead it is an attempt to shake free of habituated thought as regards the life and being of things in our time – as with his example of the bridge or, we could add, the freeway: 'The bridge is a thing and *only that*. Only? As this thing it gathers the fourfold' (Heidegger 1993: 355). He is trying to find a way into the existence of this thing that is neither matter of fact nor symbolic and not that dissimilar, really, from Benjamin's 'profane illumination' as glimpsed through Surrealism. He is searching for that third meaning, only like Barthes wrestling with the image he can't find the language for there is none. Not in our time, there isn't.

Or better still think of Kafka, as he comes across in Benjamin's comparison with the physicist Eddington describing what it means for the human body to step through a doorway defying gravity as well as the movement of the earth spinning on its axis (Benjamin 1973). At once supernatural and natural – and thus estranging – this quality of being is largely lost to us as it recedes into the bodily unconscious and so we read Kafka – not everyday life – as weird. We will do the same in the Third World city a few days after arrival by which time we have become accustomed to the poverty and normality of the abnormal such as these displaced persons of the no-man's land by the freeway. Did I say free? 'I am never here only as this encapsulated body', writes Heidegger, as if he too is drawing *à la* John Berger and becoming one with what is drawn. But then what are we to make of the man in the nylon bag sending us distress signals from within his enclosed space, a head in a deep sea diver's helmet? Or the woman – if she is a woman – sewing herself into that same nylon bag?

Let me try and straighten out misleading ideas about appeals to spirits as I understand this situation as it pertains to the question *What do Pictures Want?* This is not necessarily the same as prayer or solicitation of saints or of God in the world's major religions. This is not asking the guy upstairs for a helping hand. Rather it pertains to a radically different universe as described by anthropologists in which spirits – whatever they are – are copies of beings in this world, such that there exists a magically mimetic relationship between beings in this world and those in those Other invisible worlds and these spirits can be contacted through song, dance, prayer, or picturing, as with the taking of hallucinogens, or painted on the dancing body and the desert floor for a select audience of humans.

Therefore in curing a person, for example, my job will be directed not at that person but at the relevant spirits, and this is where most analysis, including that of anthropologists, goes wrong, because their Enlightenment paradigm unconsciously instructs them to concentrate on the curer-patient, i.e., the person-person, relationship, not the curer-spirit relationship which is basically a curer-picture relationship. Yet this mistake cannot be solved by a mere shift in focus. It requires a change in attitude and language and the careful placement of scene – as with the scene of writing and as with that Naskapi hunter and his kill, for example, described by Frank Speck that I mentioned

earlier, or Bataille and the bison on the walls of the caves. Berger suggests this, I think, where he talks of the corporeality of drawing and wonders if it is very old, along with song and dance. In the so called modern world of art specialists, critics, philosophers, art makers, museums, curators and collectors, all this has been stripped away no matter how much installation art and performance art may try to rectify the situation. You really can't ask what pictures want any more unless you recruit these new spirits to whom I refer.

It will seem worse than sketchy of me to situate real people in desperate circumstance in this way. Yet the equation endures because it is precisely in such a circumstance of desperation, of dread and danger, that real people emanate a spirit-like character that affects us all.

To witness by means of drawing a picture is to hail these very same spirits, an acknowledgement from a faceless passer by as to the charge they put into the world.

It is not that they are spirits, but they become so when traduced into a picture.

And this is what my picture wants.

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