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Editorial: Semiotic Life of Plants

by Gerard J. van den Broek

The semiotic significance of plants for humankind has not been more poignantly - though implicitly - described than by the French army physician Julien Offray de La Mettrie in his *L'homme-plante* (1748). A human could almost be replaced by a plant, such was the similarity between the physiology of man and the representations of the vegetative realm, according to La Mettrie. There are, elaborates the encyclopédiste, significant similarities between the two.

Fortunately, La Mettrie was only jesting and mocking at the newly defined method of classification developed by Carl von Linné (Linnaeus). His classificatory system, launched in 1735 in his doctoral thesis, was based on the sexual organs of flowers and was winning ground in France at the time. Though the significance of the botanical world cannot be underestimated for scientific and scholarly pursuits during the 18th century, and a new paradigm had been created and in a way still persists, at least with regard to the binominality of the nomenclature (cf. Van den Broek 1986), the question remains: is a semiotics of botany or a semiotics of plants feasible?

A number of other core questions emerge from this principal one. Is there a semiosis of natural signs, for the distinctive features of plants are, after all, selected by humankind; or, are they? Do natural signs actually exist? Is there a difference between natural signs and symptoms, the nature of which has been object of discussion for many years (cf. Eco 1976, Sebeok 1976, Bouissac, Herzfeld, Posner 1986). Much depends on definition and perspective.

For the alchemical botanists in the 16th and even the 17th century, there was absolutely no doubt about the inherent sign value of plants. They were convinced, on the basis of the works of Aristotle and Hermetic philosophy, that God in his creation of the world had hidden signs, perhaps as clues, for humankind so that the beneficial qualities of plants and animals (and, in fact, all natural phenomena) could be discovered. So, while searching for the Philosopher's Stone, the alchemical botanists wove an intricate semiotic system around plants. Perhaps their world was even more meaningful than ours today, despite the progress of the natural sciences. This is not, in fact, surprising, as their conception of the world was based on the Gnostic notions of Hermes Trismegistus, the Pater Philosophorum, who paved the way for a cultural substream that influenced the structure of the Globe Theatre of Shakespeare, and the cathedrals of Chartres and Notre Dame in Paris. His philosophy even led eventually to homeopathy as we know it (Van den Broek 1986).

In the efforts of the alchemists to discover the predetermined order in this universum, they were certain about the implicit meaning of all natural phenomena. The alchemists were Gnostics in the strictest sense, that is, they were convinced that they were able to *know* the world. Indeed, the semiotic system they unraveled in the world of plants was actually the semiotics of God Almighty.

So these alchemical botanists had a relatively easy job since they only had to rediscover the meaning and order God had bestowed upon the world. They were looking for an intentional sign system,

not a natural, or unintentional one. Although we might presume that the world of plants is a natural one, and that it has no inherent meaning, except as a result of the signs we see and create, it is very much a matter of perspective. As for the alchemists and herbalists of the 16th and 17th century, nature was a universe of Godly signs, intertwining plants, diseases, the characteristics of planets and constellations, future happenings, the weather, and the effects of peripatetic medicine.

Although these proto-scientists - Isaac Newton was a fervent searcher for the transformational process of turning any matter into gold - created a meaningful system based on all kinds of signs, the mere description of this search for meaning is not a semiotic analysis that we would recognize; it is an ethnosemantic analysis at best. Presenting the meaning of plants, flowers and trees merely to show that these have such different meanings and roles in the course of history of so many different cultures (Goody 1993) is much too meagre for proper semiotic analysis; neither is it enough for structural analysis, which aims at demonstrating how subsurface structures order superficial ones, and shape their meaning almost unnoticed. Merely making the meaning of the participants' world visible is not semiotic analysis. The meaning of the meaning of the participants must be clear to the researcher for then and only then may one speak of semiotic analysis. Unfortunately, the meaning of the researcher does not have to be clear to the participants, but that is the result of many a scientific analysis. Just as the average person in the street does not understand the meaning of $E = mc^2$ members of a given culture might not grasp the meaning of a scholarly semiotic analysis. As a result, feedback will be hindered. But then the question arises: is a meaning which is not understood by the participants, whose own system of meaning was the basis of a new system of meaning produced through scholarship, a truly meaningful system? I think it is, or better, might be, as every subculture has its own system of meaning, its own semiosis, its own vocabulary, and sign systems, both verbal and non-verbal. It is the task of semioticians, anthropologists, and sympathetic researchers to investigate the meaning of, for instance, the ethnosystem (botany in a given subculture).

Although ethnosemantics was a notion that brought us more than one step further in understanding one another, it should not be the end of cultural analysis, even when we consider that "the work of Conklin, Breedlove and Berlin from the early sixties paved the way for Lévi-Strauss's structuralism" (Van den Broek 1997:113). Just as structuralism gave greater depth to ethnosemantics, semiotics has added new notions to structural analysis, and ethnosemantics even emerged from it; still, a lot depends on definition and thorough empirical, falsifiable evidence. And the tools semiotics, structuralism and all varieties of the ethno-approach offer, will provide us in the end with a deeper insight into the structuring and signifying capabilities of human beings in the various cultural and historical settings in relation to their environments.

Despite the fact that some scholars ultimately believe there is an "implicate order" (Waddington 1977) or a "mind in nature" (Bateson 1980), a more prudent way to go about understanding the meaning of plants is perhaps called for.

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Pokémon as Interactive Literature

by Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L.F. Nilsen

About ten years ago, those of us working in adolescent literature were waiting eagerly for what was described as interactive fiction. One year we even held up the publication of a best-books list while we waited for those among us who were computer literate to send in their evaluations. Finally we got a note saying they hadn't found anything wonderful "just yet," but "maybe, next year."

"Next year" never came, partly because we weren't sure what we were looking for. All we knew was that this new literature would be more sophisticated than the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books and it would have something to do with computers.

Ironically, when truly interactive literature finally arrived, we failed to recognize it. It snuck into the United States from Japan under the name of Pokémon ("pocket monsters"), and because its first appearance was in a cartoon format, we dismissed it as a passing fad aimed at children.

And then, when Nintendo began selling Pokémon Gameboys for something like \$80.00(US), along with \$30.00 cartridges, trading cards, T-shirts, caps, stuffed toys, and every other kind of paraphernalia anyone could dream up, we dismissed Pokémon again, this time because it was so commercialized.

However, the phenomenon is getting hard to ignore. It was the cover story on the October 30 to November 5, 1999 *TV Guide*; the far out South Park advertised that it would be satirizing Pokémon on its November 3, 1999 show, and our local newspaper, *The Arizona Republic* (October 31, 1999) carried a feature article about the 12,000 kids who showed up for a two-day Pokémon "training fair" put on by Nintendo at a local shopping mall.

An article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (September 15, 1999) told about several principals banning Pokémon trading cards from their schools because kids were so distracted by them that they were missing their buses as well as their teachers' lessons.

Also, younger kids were getting exploited in their trades with older kids. One parent even accused a teacher of "stealing" cards from her child when early in the day the teacher took cards away from several children and then, when it was time to go home, didn't return the same cards.

Principal Tim Duax at Shorewood's Atwater School banned the cards only from classrooms because he said "Trading cards — like baseball cards — are part of children's culture." He videotaped a Pokémon cartoon to show at a faculty meeting saying that "It's such a rage right now, we need to know the educational aspects of it."

Principal Duax is a man after our own hearts. While he praised the cartoon for its themes of "friendship, cooperation and trying to do good deeds," we are ready to praise the game for being truly interactive and intertextual fiction and for teaching children techniques of modern word formation as well as for developing their reading and social skills, along with their enjoyment and appreciation of literary symbols and archetypes.

The game is a journey of adventure, caring, teaching, and learning. The good Pokémon player is not the one who vanquishes all foes or finishes

first, but the one who explores, backtracks, learns, and enjoys the journey. The human characters in the cartoon and in the game include a boy named Ash Ketchum (his name fits into the slogan of "Gotta Catch 'em All!"), a girl named Misty, who is the Gym Leader of Cirulean City and specializes in water Pokémon, a boy named Brock who is the Gym leader of Pewter City and specializes in rock Pokémon, and an older and wiser Dr. Oak and his son Gary. These people are all caregivers to their Pokémon, who could be any of 150 fascinating creatures living in Pokéballs and coming out at their master's bidding.

Gameboy players become caregivers of their own Pokémon (players can carry a maximum of six) as they journey forth on what is basically a romantic quest as outlined in Northrup Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Players put themselves in an idealized world where good things are really good and bad things are really bad. In the words of Frye (1957:203):

The Romance involves the Journey, and the Journey involves the Hero, the Villain, the Quest, the Sage, the Prohibition, the Sacrifice, the Dragon, the Treasure, and sometimes the rescue of the Maiden. The epiphany (mountain top, tower, island, lighthouse, ladder, staircase, Jack's beanstock, Rapunzel's hair, Indian rope trick, etc.) connects Heaven and Earth.

On their idealized journeys in the Gameboys, players may meet and be challenged by such human characters as Ash, Misty, and Brock, who are aided by their own Pokémon. They might also be challenged by obstacles of nature so that they must get advice from characters they meet along the way or find technical help such as *flash* to help them escape from dark caves or *cut* to get past bushes into restricted zones.

In Frye's sense of a romance, the good guys are Ash, Brock and Misty, the bad guys are minor characters appropriately named Jessie and James, the sage is Professor Oak and his Pokédex, the prohibition is "Don't be a bad Pokémon trainer," the dragons are Giovanni and Persian, the sacrifice is a loss of Pokémon, while the treasure is the gaining of wisdom which is shown through the picking up of techniques and tools and the acquisition of more numerous and more powerful Pokémon.

The story is interactive in that game players have thousands of choices to make so that each story is truly unique. Players who want to look for water Pokémon head for Cirulean City, those who prefer such earthy Pokémon as Onyx, Zubat, and Golem head for a cave, while those who want to deal with ghosts and spirits head for Lavender City and its mausoleum-like tower and funereal music.

While each player creates a different story, all the stories fit into genre of the picaresque novel as exemplified by Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Stories about picaros are usually told in plain language about people without power, prestige, or authority, who embark on episodic journeys in which they are forced to live by their wits as they come in contact with people from other cultures and social classes.

Many adults who see kids huddled over Gameboys with dazed looks on their faces feel uneasy and worry that kids are checking out of real life and transporting themselves off into cyberspace. Looking at one child at a time, adults could easily be led to think of the Pokémon game as anti-social, but in fact the game is one of the most social phenomena we have seen.

As soon as two or more Pokémon players get together, they eagerly compare notes and share techniques. Even children who have not yet mastered basic reading and writing skills are playing the game at surprisingly sophisticated levels because they have been taught by other children. The trading cards are visible evidence of the kind of sharing that goes on, but the cards are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

The game is so complicated that few adults have even the vaguest idea of how it is played. One of its great appeals to children is that they get to be the caregivers. They are beneficent dictators, the role that Alison Lurie (1990) in her *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature*, ascribes to Christopher Robin in *Winnie the Pooh*. Players have the responsibility of deciding whether to trade Pokémon, what skills or techniques their Pokémon should use, what kinds of further training and education their Pokémon should receive, and whether in a conflict they should run or stay and fight. If a Pokémon is injured, the caregiver must decide what antidotes, potions, and vitamins should be administered, and whether the Pokémon should be left at a care centre.

Our second major reason for recommending Pokémon as a rich literary text is that it is filled with interesting language. Many linguists say that the English language is changing faster today than it has at any time since the Norman conquest. This means that if people's only approach to unknown words is to look them up in a dictionary, they will be left behind because words can't get into dictionaries as fast as they are being invented and spread around the world through the mass media.

The names of the 150 Pokémon creatures demonstrate how new words are made and give children practice in connecting related words to each other. We recently overheard a 10-year-old proudly tell his father he could remember the names of 150 Pokémon. The father's attitude was fairly typical as he responded, "Well, how many presidents can you name?"

One reason the boy can remember more Pokémon than presidents is that the Pokémon names are descriptive in matching the monsters' unique images. For example, Kangaskhan carries a baby in a front pocket; Tangela is covered with tangled hair, and Staryu and Starmie are shaped like stars. While the names have their own unique spellings, most of them are created from ordinary words or sounds that kids know.

Without realizing it, players are getting lessons in morphology. Morphemes are the smallest units of language that carry meaning (suffixes, prefixes, infixes, and basic words and roots). Most of the Pokémon evolve into more powerful or more complex creatures so that they come in related sets, using one or more of the same morphemes. For example, Koffing evolves into Weezing, Jigglypuff into Wigglytuff, Sandshrew into Sandlash, Magnemite into Magnetron, and Venonat into Venomoth. Other evolved sets may not use the same morphemes, but their meanings are related as when Drowzee evolves into Hypno, Grimer into Muk, Growlith into Arcanine, and Caterpie into Metapod and then into Butterfree.

While language purists may feel uncomfortable about the game's creative spelling, this is, in fact, part of modern word formation, especially in business where to copyright a brand name, or in this case, the Pokémon figures, the spelling has to be unique as in Krispy crackers, Holsum bread, Jif peanut butter, Sun-Maid raisins, and Nestle's Quik chocolate syrup. The Pokémon creators are very aware of spelling and the difference a single letter can make as in the name Mankey who evolves into

Primeape and Gastly, with its gas flames, who evolves into Haunter.

Players also get lessons in symbolism. Col-our symbolism is shown through green being associated with plant-like creatures such as Bulbasaur and Ivysaur, blue with water creatures such as Squirtle, Wartortle, and Blastoise, brown with earth creatures such as Geodude and Graveler, orange with fire creatures such as Charmander and Charmeleon, yellow with electric and light-giving creatures such as Pikachu (from the Japanese word for flashlight) and Electabuzz, and purple for creatures with various kinds of poison such as Shellder, Cloyster, and Pinsir.

Pink is associated with those who have magic or supernatural powers. Among these are two roly-poly characters who have a good chance of becoming librarians' favourites. They are named Clefairy and Clefable and each has a forehead lock of hair resembling the bass clef sign in music. Their method of attack is by singing or swaying back and forth using the hypnotic effect of a metronome.

We aren't suggesting that you replace story hour with Pokémon cartoons or that you sponsor trading card sessions or Gameboy competitions, but you might want to invest in Hank Schlesinger's *How to Become a Pokémon Master* (1999), James Ratkos and Elizabeth M. Hollinger's *Pokémon: Prima's Official Strategy Guide* (1999), and Mark MacDonald's *Pokémon Trainer's Survival Guide* (1998). These handbooks, packed with information that is challenging even to sophisticated readers, bear testament to the power of children's abilities to teach each other.

One of our adult students who just returned from Japan told us in that country it wasn't unusual to see adults playing the game nor to see Pokémon stickers on businessmen's briefcases. Popular media articles in the U.S. stress that Pokémon is most likely a passing fad of interest to children between 7 and 10 years of age. However, at the Pokémon fair held in our local shopping mall, we saw several young teens. We suspect that as these children grow older they will keep playing the game, thereby extending the interest level upwards, so that it may become for tomorrow's teenagers what *Dungeons and Dragons* was for young adults now in their 20's and 30's.

In the meantime, we recommend a friendly smile for kids with their Gameboys and their trading cards because serious players of the game are learning the very kinds of literary and language skills that we have long aspired to teach them, and they are doing it with the kind of pleasure that will make them want to lose themselves in good books as well as in good games.

Alleen and Don Nilsen are professors of English at Arizona State University and the authors of the *Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor*, just released by Oryx Press.

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Reading Painting

Louis Marin, *Sublime Poussin*

Translated by Catherine Porter.

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

By Anne Urbancic

Jacques Derrida (1996) has recently asked a series of unanswerable questions about Louis Marin: "Who could ever speak of the work of Louis Marin? Who could ever speak of all the work and works of Louis Marin? What is, what will have been, what will still be tomorrow the energy of Louis Marin?" That energy is intangible, but can at least be glimpsed in the wealth of details, and the obvious pleasure, that inform Louis Marin's study of Poussin. Let us then speak of at least one work of Marin.

Born at La Tronche (Isere) in 1931, Marin's became a life of many works. He began his academic career as a philosopher. Today he is acknowledged not only as a philosopher, but also as one of the greatest researchers into the 17th century, and as a semiotician, a historiographer, and art critic. Before his death in October 1992, he had also been recognized as a cultural counselor for the Office of the French Ambassador in Turkey (1961-64), as well as an academic, having taught in Paris, San Diego and Baltimore. I am intrigued by Derrida's challenge regarding Marin. There is certainly much left undiscovered for those who study his contributions to the various fields in which he made a name for himself. On the other hand, *Sublime Poussin* reveals much of Marin even as it uncovers the works of Poussin. While he teaches us to "read" the works of Poussin, Marin allows us to "read" Marin as well.¹

This study, published posthumously seven years after Marin's death, represents the careful work of six compilers who have based their work on an outline drawn up by Marin in 1988 for a study of the same name. As compilers, they acknowledge the limitations of their role and they advise us in the beginning that their work "makes no claim to be the book Louis Marin intended to write" (1). Surely they are aware of the delightful challenge they set before us: reading a text that the author never wrote, about a subject area that is not usually overtly read. One is reminded of a similar, hugely successful endeavour undertaken by author Julian Barnes (1989) in his study of Géricault's painting of the wreck of the Medusa (*Scène de naufrage*, 1816). The study, found in *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, is particularly fascinating because in it Barnes also analyses what Géricault had chosen not to paint. To this we shall return later.

Authors of fiction have generally accepted far more quickly than art historians what Marin's work points to, namely, that painting can be a discourse and that, as such, it may be "read."

While art historians are often necessarily bound by the parameters of their academic traditions, writers of prose and poetry need not take these same limits into consideration. Imagine how differently the analysis of Géricault's canvas would be if Barnes were an art historian and had "read" only what Géricault had actually painted without speculating on what had been omitted. Such speculation is not diminished by the fact that Barnes' work is "officially" classified as fiction, and not art criticism. Or imagine if James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* had indeed been a painted canvas; or if Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* had not been read through the actual character, or even if that "last Duchess painted on the wall/Looking as if she were alive" had not had "that spot of joy" upon her cheek read by Robert Browning, who saw in it the hint of marital infidelity?

Marin, of course, is not an author of fiction. Nor is he an art historian in the strictest sense. On the other hand, as a semiotician, he is sensitive to art and especially to the works of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), who is both artist and theoretician of painting. As semiotician, Marin is clearly intrigued by the speculations that arise when he considers the meaning of pictorial art and Poussin's reflections on its meaning. Significantly, he begins his study with the confirmation that "[w]e read letters, poems, books" (5), precisely those areas, that is, where we remain unfettered by the traditions of art history and art criticism. Then his leading question: "What does it mean to read drawings, paintings, frescoes? After all, the term 'reading' is immediately applicable to books; can we say the same for pictures?" (5)

Marin's point of departure is a text, in the generally accepted sense. He begins his study with a letter written in 1639 in Rome by Poussin to M. Chantelou. Chantelou had commissioned a painting from the artist who writes to advise him that the painting is about to be delivered. Marin sees his enterprise first as one of comparison: how is a text, as opposed to a painting, read? Second, what are the theoretical premises that underlie both literature and painting, the legible and the visible? And finally he wishes to speculate on how "the dimensions in which the legible and the visible aspects of a picture are variously linked and contrasted" (6). Referring back to his commendable work on the Port-Royal logicians, Marin recalls how for them, to look at a picture as an iconic representamen is also to give it an immediate "reading." The problem that arises from such a position is one of comprehension: is it possible to "understand" paintings in the same manner we understand sentences and propositions? Do the figures of a painting lend themselves to analysis as signs or as tropes?

The painting we are to read in this first chapter is Poussin's *The Israelites Gathering the Manna*. As readers of this study, we should be wary: we shall most certainly not be reading the same pictorial discourse that Marin was reading in preparing his essay. The painting is reproduced for us in a small format, in black and white. Much detail is unclear. While it cannot be said for certain, Marin's "reading" probably included the frame of the painting; although Poussin sent the painting without a frame, he gave Chantelou fairly explicit instructions on what was required. So, in effect, Marin, is not "reading" the painting the way Chantelou or even Poussin himself would have read it initially, without its frame. Nor are we able to read the painting as Poussin had intended, in the placement he had envisaged for it: "[i]t must be hung very little above eye level, if not a little below" (229). In this es-

say, Marin is concerned foremost with the gaps that are created between the textual discourse (the letter to Chantelou) and the pictorial discourse (the painting itself). He carefully points out the elements of the painting that allow us to read with him, since for us, hindered as we are by the black and white reproduction, the gaps cannot be deciphered in the same way. The visible, he concludes after focusing on the figure of the young woman nursing an older woman at her breast and denying her breast to a young child (a figure identified as ‘Roman charity’), is not necessarily the only “readable” aspect. There may indeed be another story which the picture neither shows nor tells but which informs it nevertheless. That particular element in this painting is the Manna itself, which points to the Eucharist, an element not represented in Poussin’s canvas but read in it nevertheless.

In the following essay, Marin focuses on how the descriptors assigned to a painting determine our reading of it. He contends that there is a spontaneous “telling” of the painting that takes place, quite deliberately, already at the surface level. Once described, the painting is no longer simply a pleasure-producing entity but, rather, it “becomes a text on which successive readings are deposited” (30). He proposes as his example one of Poussin’s landscapes. Art critic Anthony Blunt, in “reading” this painting, assigned it a name indicative of its principal marks or signs: *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. But we have additional texts at our disposal, namely Fénelon’s *Dialogues des morts* (in which there is a fictional exchange regarding this painting between Leonardo da Vinci and Poussin) and three texts by André Félibien taken from his *Entretiens sur les vies des plus excellents peintres*, in addition to the legend found for Etienne Baudet’s engraving of Poussin’s piece. In reading these, we may see beyond the painting’s pivotal circumstance, the man asphyxiated by a snake, upon which Blunt has focused, in order to speculate on what is “behind” the painting. The reading will never be a complete one, however. For example, our textual readings give no indication as to the function of the central figure of the canvas, the only woman, on whose face we recognize horror and terror. Her presence poses a problem for us since she cannot see from her standpoint what we can see, that is, the dead man with the enormous snake still wrapped around him. She has created a signifying gap to which Marin points only to show us that in a painting there remains hidden a signifying polyvalence beyond the guiding textual descriptions.

The subsequent chapters on Poussin’s treatment of tempests emphasize once again the polyvalence of all the signs that may be read into and in a painting. Here the concept of the sublime enters the discourse. “What is the status of the sublime in painting?” Marin asks. “And if storms are instances of the natural sublime, what is the status of painting of the sublimity of tempests?” These are questions that have been posed in a similar way about more traditional discursive texts. I am thinking of the Italian Romantic, Giacomo Leopardi (1797-1837), who perhaps better than most was able to read the sublime in a storm and dealt with the topic both theoretically and poetically. In his poem “The Calm After the Storm,” he focused on that brief moment, the gap, between the end of the storm and the renewal of after-storm activities in order to read the cruel intentions of Mother Nature. But Leopardi was not obliged to render visible to us the effects of a tempest; his poem, in fact, revolves around the principal verb “I hear” and not “I see.” In our mind’s eye, we as readers do the visualizing. Poussin, on the other hand, in deal-

ing with pictorial discourse finds himself before a greater problem. Reading both the canvas entitled *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, and the letter Poussin wrote to Jacques Stella in which he describes this work, Marin points to the gaps between the two discourses. Furthermore, we must realize that Poussin is attempting to paint “things that cannot be painted, such as lightning, thunder, and storms: the impossible subject of painting through which the act of painting is nevertheless consummated” (71). Over and above his mechanical work of depiction, Poussin is also integrating cosmic time into existential time, the universal into a moment portrayed on the canvas. Marin notes how the storm can be read through the implied movement of the painting, the seeming agitation of all the elements, the bent and twisted trees, the swirling dust, the flashes of lightning. But the sublime remains in the gap, represented here by a surprising element, the calm unruffled lake. A trope of inverisimilitude, a fiction, given the ambient agitation. Is this a flaw, wonders Marin? Or is it, in effect, “a different character, one that is no longer a character belonging to the painting but is rather the great eye of the viewer, of the sage who has been brought back to himself by the representation of the unrepresentability of the tempest and the human passions?” (102) Poussin’s landscape, Marin writes in a subsequent essay entitled “The Classical Sublime,” depicts the pathetic aspects of the cosmic tempest. Simultaneously, in the mirror of still water at the centre of the landscape, it shows the contemplative apathy of the painter-subject: “The sublime is played out in the place of the figure [of the tempest] that represents it and by the space of its difference from that figure itself within which it withdraws” (124). The sublime will go beyond the contemplator, it consists in its incommensurability with the present moment of the contemplation. The existential moment becomes the cosmic moment. Herein lies the difficulty of theorizing the sublime, for theory implies a certain objective apathy.

Subsequently, Marin explored another problematic posed by our understanding of the sublime. He posited that the sublime necessitates contemplative apathy, as in the tempest pictures. What if contemplative apathy is somehow co-opted by the picture? What if the gaze of the viewer and the gaze of the painted subject meet? This is not a consideration for the landscape paintings, nor even canvases where our gaze meets the closed eyes of the body in repose. The sleeping body, such as it is depicted in Poussin’s *Echo and Narcissus*, or *Rinaldo and Armida*, represents for Marin a mute poem, a poem of the concealed possibility of activity. The sleeping body captures that moment between silence and speech, a moment of metamorphosis “in which the space of the subject is opened and from which the I emerges from its sleeping reserve” (169). The sublime is found in the secret ecstasy of that nascent I, the contemplative gaze. If, on the other hand, the gaze is returned to the viewer, then we sense not only its reward, a pleasure for having stopped to gaze in the first place, but also a certain displacement. This is felt all the more strongly when we gaze upon self-portraits of the artist; when we are cognizant that the “subject-to-be-painted” is identified with the “subject-of-the-painting-process” (188).

Marin’s study of the two self-portraits executed by Poussin is truly the pivotal and most fascinating chapter of this volume. Again, he begins by relying on a textual discourse, namely the correspondence of Poussin with Chantelou regarding the two canvases. The latter had asked

Poussin for a painting of the artist, but Poussin was unable to find any painter to carry out this request. He thus made the decision to do a self-portrait; in fact, he painted two of them. His words about them, written to Chantelou on 20 June, 1649 are intriguing: “I shall send you the one that comes out best, but you must say nothing about it, please, to avoid causing any jealousy” (184). He leaves unsaid who will be jealous, although subsequent correspondence points to a rivalry between the two recipients, Chantelou and M. Pointel. Despite the fact that the portraits are of the same subject, by the same painter, at the same moment of his life, they are distinguished by their subjectively qualitative difference: one, according to Poussin, is better than the other. They are not simply copies or near copies of each other. The artist refers as well to his hesitation and to his difficulties in painting his own self. In undertaking this task, he is obliged to pass from being a subject to being an object, and in his case, because there were two portraits, from one subject to two objects, one of which is better than the other. What is at stake here, according to Marin, “is nothing less than ... painting itself” (187). He proceeds with a detailed analysis of how to “read” the two portraits, and focuses, finally, on the gaze of the painter-subject and that of the viewer. He shows how, in the Chantelou self-portrait of 1650, we are co-opted into following the gaze of the objectified subject. We return his gaze, but we can see so much more, for he cannot see the drama of the half-hidden canvases behind him. At the same, we can imitate his ignorance of the drama with our own gap in knowledge because the female figure in the background canvas, the one he is unable to see, is also gazing out at someone whose arms are stretched out to her, someone we, like the artist-subject, cannot see. In effect, what we see and cannot see in the background is the story of painting, according to Marin, for the half hidden figure allows us to understand that there does exist a story of painting and of its painter (208). Marin’s essay immediately brings to mind Michel Foucault’s (1970) study in *The Order of Things* in which made similar observations on the gaze of the painter in Velazquez’ *Las Meninas*. There, too, is the element of the drama behind the artist, the courtier who enters unseen by the artist but is visible to us. There, too, is the element of our own ignorance of the drama that we see only faintly, but that the artist sees clearly, namely the King Philip IV and his Queen at whom the artist-subject directs his gaze, but whom we see only dimly reflected in the mirror behind the artist. There, too, we must read the story of painting through the gaps, the absences, and play of the seen and unseen.

The final essay of this volume, given originally as a talk for the Association of Seventeenth-Century French Studies, summarizes Marin’s enquiry into the nature of the sublime in France in the 1670s. It is a reflection on the “je ne sais quoi” of the sublime, a notion that is not merely an abstract and perhaps trite locution, but is actually posed as a problematic, vis-à-vis the idea of the sublime as it is explored in various contemporary treatises, specifically in Dominique Bouhours’ *Entretiens d’Artiste et d’Eugène* (1671). That this locution may be applied to the sublime already points to the fact that it is impossible to construct the sublime as a concept. Marin continues: “It is easy to re-cognize the sublime in discourse, in a poem or a painting, but this recognition is in exact proportion to its theoretical indefinability, the impossibility of producing rules for the construction of its concept” (211). In the 1670s, the question of the sublime is posed through the attempt to integrate the marvelous, what is *phantasia*, with the mechanics of representation. According to Marin, the element of

the “je ne sais quoi” is what betrays the sublime as an aesthetic motif. If we are to believe Bouhours, the marvelous is the union of two terms or two thoughts that initially seem incompatible; it at once causes both astonishment and pleasure. Marin puts it in slightly different terms that are just as valid: the sublime is the sense of recognition of both the construction and deconstruction, of reading a discourse for what is there and for what is not there.

Marin’s studies of the sublime in the works of Nicolas Poussin take for granted the static nature of the discourses he is reading. His initial enquiry into whether or not we can read pictures in ways similar to texts, prose or poetry, has brought us inevitably to an affirmative answer, but an answer nonetheless that involves our understanding of that discourse as unchanging, as having captured a moment of diachronic and synchronic (his)story that allows us to gaze, contemplate, and interrogate, without having to consider changes to its essential nature. The frame of the painting may be missing, as Julian Barnes pointed out in his study of Géricault’s painting, but we may still “read” the painting, as Marin shows. On the other hand, what if the concept of reading the sublime, as Marin posits it in the works of Nicolas Poussin, were to be applied to more fluid works? Can we speak of the sublime in non-static pieces that co-opt the idea of marvelous and astonishment into the essential nature of change, as Marin, following Bouhours, would have it? I am thinking here (and these are arbitrary choices) of art pieces such as Jana Sterbak’s *Flesh Dress*, where the deterioration of the flesh was part of the “reading” of the piece. Or, for example, Janet Cardiff’s *The Whispering Room*, where our sense of the marvelous was displaced and reconstructed each time the multi-media piece was “experienced” (not viewed, for the piece was highly dependent on the audition and mobility of the contemplator as well as on visual acuity). Marin’s attempt to read a static landscape through its gaps and discrepancies with mimetic representation is a laudable enterprise, and his observations are highly appreciated. In such an important study it is regrettable that the paintings themselves are so poorly reproduced - in black and white and in small format - with the results that many of the details so vital to the readings are not even accessible. Marin’s concepts and his explication of these deserve better.

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Notes

1. Marin had established himself as a “reader” of portraits many years before. Other works on a similar theme include *Détruire la peinture* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1977); *Le portrait du roi* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1981); *Opacité de la peinture: essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento* (Paris: Usher, 1989); *De la représentation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994); and *Des pouvoirs de l’images: gloses* (Paris: Seuil, 1993)

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Keeping the Mystery Alive

Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

By Thomas Dunk

The title page of Michael Taussig’s latest book carries an epigraph from Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: “Truth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it.” Thus, the most general aim of *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* is itself revealed and yet, as Taussig is at pains to emphasize throughout the book, when it comes to public secrets exposure only generates more mystery. Like so many of Benjamin’s aphorisms this one is as frustratingly obscure as it is fascinating. What could it possibly mean to do justice to a secret? For Taussig, it seems the point is to ensure that exposure does not destroy the mystery and the magic which public secrets carry.

The book operates on at least three levels simultaneously. It offers an intriguing characterization of the nature and importance of public secrets in social life, drawing on examples from the contemporary world and classic ethnographic texts; it provides a critique of the Enlightenment project as it is manifested in the social sciences’ goal of explaining the social world in terms of historical origins and social functions; and it exposes the gender and spatial biases of northern European, male intellectuals, especially anthropologists, when it comes to issues such as truth and rationality.

Anthropology has a long association with surrealism (see Clifford 1988: 117-85) and since his second book on South American peasant/workers (Taussig 1987a), Taussig has been busy fanning the flames of this tendency in anthropology. His first book, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980), used Marxist categories such as commodity fetishism, use-value and exchange-value to explain what to Western modernist minds seemed like bizarre ideas and practices that Columbian and Bolivian peasant/workers employed to make sense of the changes they were experiencing as capitalist social relations infiltrated their essentially pre- or non-capitalist communities. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* established Taussig as a name in anthropology, but the criticisms of more structurally-oriented, Marxist anthropologists who argued that Taussig romanticized the peasant communities and ignored more explicitly political and material issues of class struggle, soured him on Marxist anthropology and on the academic subculture of anthropologists (Taussig 1987b). Marxist interpretations of stories about pacts between peasant/workers and the devil gave way to poststructuralist attempts to represent the endless cycle of cultural interpretation, mimesis, and exaggeration involved in colonial and neo-colonial relationships.

Since the late 1980s, he has tried to capture the rich meaningfulness of life in all its mixed-up horror and joy. He has delved into and represented for his readers the epistemic murk of human life, not with the intention of explaining it to them, but rather in the hopes of shaking up their unexamined, common sense reality. The

surrealist impulse to make the normal strange continues to pulsate in his latest work. The world is turned topsy-turvy: arses become faces; desecration enhances the sacred status of an object; secrets are the basis of truth; transgression generates rules; revelation reproduces mystery. Fetishism is still an important concept for Taussig, but now it is understood through the theoretical musings of Nietzsche, Bataille, Freud, and Lacan rather than Marx. The basic observation that Taussig weaves his text around is that defacements or revelations often fail to undermine the power and mystery with which objects, actions or persons were imbued before their destruction or exposure. A couple of his more straightforward examples illustrate his point. Part One begins with a montage of news clips from a variety of sources about various kinds of defacement, but Taussig’s central example is the attack upon and ultimate destruction of off-beat statues of a naked Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip that were erected in a Melbourne park and which became the object of a heated debate and vandalism. In short order, the statues were destroyed and removed, leaving an empty space beside a park bench. People continued to come to the park to gaze upon the vacant spot where the statues had been. Their destruction apparently empowered them and, thus, they maintained a presence even in their absence. In Part Four, he discusses the face as a surface that both reveals and conceals. A key example here is subcomandante Marcos, leader of the Zapatista rebels in Mexico. As the world knows, the subcomandante always appears masked and so the Mexican state made much of publicly revealing the face behind the mask. But this effort at disempowering Marcos’s mystique through unmasking failed. Five thousand masked demonstrators appeared claiming that they were all Marcos. Just as the destruction of the statues enhanced their meaningfulness, unmasking the subcomandante seems to have increased his stature and rendered him all the more mysterious.

Ethnographically, historically, and geographically, the book traverses a huge terrain: from Australia in the early 1990s, to anarchist villages in Andalusia in the 1940s and 50s, to nineteenth century Venice as represented by Thomas Mann, to men’s secret societies in Tierra del Fuego early in this century; then to Amazonia, New Guinea, Australia and Africa, as described and analysed in classic ethnographies, the Zapatista guerrillas, and finally back to Australia, this time in the form of Taussig’s childhood memories. It is an anarchic tour, as Taussig admits, and quite purposefully so. Taussig’s model is a surrealist montage rather than the dry, ordered narrative of science or logic.

While the cultural range of the book is immense, the core of the argument and the largest section of the book is focused on a (re)presentation of and commentary on ethnographic descriptions and analyses of “secret” male initiation rituals. Most attention is paid to these rituals as they were performed for anthropologists early in the twentieth century among the Yanama and Selk’nam people of Isla Grande in Tierra del Fuego. The theoretical issue of most direct concern is that the ceremonies cannot be explained in terms of their social functions or historical origins. Among the Yanama and the Selk’nam, the initiation rituals take place in a special “Big Hut” restricted to men only. The spirits enter the hut and confront the initiates. Women are said to know nothing about what happens in the ritual; indeed, they may be killed if they reveal any knowledge of the proceedings. In the course of the ritual the young initiates unmask the spirits that they have encountered and learn that they are in fact people they know, often relatives, in costume. All of the rites of pas-

sage that Taussig discusses involve similar elements of secrecy, exclusion of women, and threats against men who reveal the secrets and women who discover what actually goes on. They are also very theatrical and involve a good deal of fear and pain for the initiates.

Taussig's main goal in piling example on top of example is to highlight the excessive visceral dimensions of the rituals and the inadequacy of historical and functional explanations of public secrecy. In a number of the cases discussed, women actually do know what happens and revealing the "truth" about the gods or spirits (that they are actually other men in costume) is part of the ritual. It appears that even once the "truth" about the rituals is known, belief in the spirits and the importance of the rituals is not undermined. Everyone, or at least very many members of the societies at issue, participates in a subterfuge, pretending not to know things that they in fact do know. Women pretend not to know what the rituals involve. The men pretend it is actually gods or spirits that are invoked. The men also sometimes pretend not to know that the women actually do know what they pretend not to know. And the women pretend not to know that the men know that they actually do know but are pretending not to. The whole thing appears to be an elaborate society-wide ruse.

Conventional anthropology seeks explanations for such phenomena in terms of social functions and historical origins. Taussig is convinced of the futility of this search. For him the creation of mystery is the main point and he wants to keep the mystery alive. He argues, moreover, that it cannot be any other way. The dialectical process of revelation and concealment is infinite; attempted explanations only create more mystery since the lifting of one veil only exposes another beneath it:

There is a comical aspect lying in wait for those who, at their peril, ignore the mix of impenetrability and everydayness that constitutes the public secret - as when the anthropologist undertakes to reveal the secret of the Big Hut, yet all along revelation was part of the secret's secret, part of its secret. From this perspective, then, the demystifications practiced by Enlightenment are already long-included in a more inclusive script in which demystification is not only a preliminary step, but is itself mystified ... (162-3).

The visceral pain and pleasure of the performance, the noise, the smells, the public secrecy, these are the enchanted elements that make social life what it is, and the very things onto which Taussig wants to hold. His inspiration is Nietzsche's notion of a "Gay Science continuous with its subject" (188). While at one level the book dissects various public secrets and acts of defacement, at another level, it is a deep critique of the entire Enlightenment project and its presumption that social life can be explained. Part of this critique involves revelations regarding the dissimilitude of anthropologists. So, for example, Taussig destroys the credibility of Julian Pitt-Rivers' well-known ethnography, *The People of the Sierra*, by showing how he refused to talk about what was arguably the most important feature of the community - that it was a bastion of Spanish anarchism - on the pretence of the need to protect the anonymity of the community, an anonymity that did not really exist since others writing about Spanish anarchism at the time (notably Eric Hobsbawm) quite readily named the community which was well-known for its political orientation. In his effort to maintain the secret which never really was a secret, and with his focus in the ethnography on the secrets involved in getting things done in the community, Pitt-Rivers managed only to reproduce a long-stand-

ing northern European prejudice against southern Europeans: namely, that the latter are inveterate liars while the more rational northerners are bound to be truth-tellers. Pitt-Rivers, like Thomas Mann's Professor Aschenbach, discovers the truth in spite of the dissimilitude of Spaniards and Venetians respectively. For added measure, Taussig throws in a discussion of Schopenhauer's theory of male facial hair - men being rational and honest need it so that they can lie, while women who are naturally superior liars do not need a beard with which to hide their true intentions.

For Taussig, the Enlightenment project as seen in typical social scientific searches for functions and origins fails not because of empirical and conceptual shortcomings. Functional explanations can only work by leaving out, hence concealing or mystifying, much of what makes a given practice interesting. Historical explanations work by displacing practices and ideas to a somewhere else in time and place and thus unintentionally create as much confusion and mystery as the event itself. The striving for functions and origins has an important symbolic and social function for (northern, male) intellectuals: "... the need on the part of the analyst to preserve obscurity and mystery, but now on terms chosen by the analyst, displacing the energy of the mystery onto baffling questions of origin and function, which I hold to be - here as elsewhere in social inquiry thinly disguised transcendent mysteries designed to eradicate mystery so as to all the better smuggle it back in. For there can be no mystery greater than function, unless it be origin, and the mind secures its function in the continuous deferral of the secrets therein" (162-3).

In a comment on the interpretations and counter-interpretations that anthropologists have made of male initiation ceremonies among the Poro people, Taussig criticizes his forerunners for their reductive logic. An earlier commentator, Beryl Bellman, had analysed the ritual as a form of speech play. Taussig argues:

Yet is there not a counter-risk here of being overly subtle, using Linguistic Science so as to bleach out all that is crazy and wild in the story conveyed by Harley [the author of the original ethnography]. Is not Harley's account notable precisely because it is so extreme and isn't it therefore incumbent on us, at the receiving end of the story, to honor that as, in all likelihood, also a quintessential characteristic of secrecy and secret societies.

My fear is that once you categorize play (as "speech-play, for instance), you've taken away all the play. To name here is to destroy. Naming it is also to break the rules of the game (of knowing what it is to know, for instance) and hence channels the game's energy and playfulness into quite other pursuits - an explanation for instance (187-8).

The idea that naming tends to destroy is, of course, not new. Naming or labelling is part of explanation, which always involves "reduction" in the sense of claiming one order of event or process is to be understood in terms of its linkage to another order of event or process (see McLennan 1996). Much of what is interesting and exciting at the level of lived experience is left behind. Yet the point of anthropological or sociological writing that is neither meant to be explicitly descriptive nor to offer explanations about the social world is not clear, especially when the writing is, as it is for the most part in this case, densely-written metalevel reflections on other authors' ethnographies. Although Taussig describes his "task" as characterization rather than explanation, he quickly goes on to argue that even this is a doomed project. At least as he puts it, characterization cannot take "its object head-on" and so must trace "the edge side-

ways like the crab scuttling" (1-2). He wants to represent the human penchant for wrapping life in mystery and revealing the nervous riotousness of it all. However, despite his cynicism regarding efforts at explanation, he cannot resist offering a few his own. He concludes a discussion of witchcraft and secret societies in Africa with the following comment: "we can appreciate the pomp and circumstance of secret societies as merely carefully crafted caricatures of the skill essential to being a person, a social person, no less than storyteller or a poet - knowing what not to know" (195) - a disappointingly banal conclusion after almost 200 pages that are often fascinating but frequently frustrating and obscure.

More problematically, he invokes Freudian psychoanalysis as reinterpreted by Lacan to try to explain the power of the defaced object or the revealed secret. Taussig cites Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's analysis of his toddler nephew's game (the famous or infamous *fort/da* game): "this game [for Lacan] involves the mythic event underlying the symbol as that which, in signifying its object, simultaneously signifies its absence: hence the somewhat overused and trivialized, but nonetheless highly significant expression absent-presence, which I myself think of, in connection with unmasking in the Big Hut, as enormously relevant, in good part because of the intense pressure it brings to bear on one's thinking about the density of nothingness and hence possibilities for an overwhelming realness, an overwhelming presencing, of absence itself" (160). The concept of an absent-presence is useful although psychoanalytic musings on a toddler's game is certainly as flimsy a guide to understanding the mysteries of social life as often less speculative theories about social functions or historical origins. Even if we adhere to the distinction between characterization and explanation, he seems to be saying that all the events and rituals he describes are in some sense the same as the *fort/da* game. To forsake historical and/or functional explanations for a highly-debatable theory about universal features of human psychological processes does not really expand our understanding or, and maybe this is Taussig's intention, it merely adds one more layer to the mystery surrounding the point of these elaborate and highly ritualized public secrets. However, it also means that the basic anthropological observation about the irreducible specificity of different cultural practices gets lost.

Given that the largest section of *Defacement* is devoted to a discussion of male initiation rituals, it would seem to be important to pay some attention to their role in the maintenance of gender divisions and male dominance. The rituals are gender exclusive and revolve around myths about how the men overturned an initial matriarchal social order. They are accompanied by threats of very severe sanctions against women who learn the truth about the men's rituals or the men who reveal the secrets to women. Clearly, part of what is going on is the reproduction of masculine identities and the preservation of male dominance, however mild a form the latter may actually take in these societies. Taussig argues against thinking about these ceremonies as a form of patriarchal ideology. He is more interested in how public secrecy generates endless interpretation since the "deceit, trickery, and never-ending labor of the negative" (173) that it involves undermines any simplistic conception of reality. He highlights the excessive nature of elements of the rituals - the pain that is inflicted, the extreme nature of the threats involved, the exaggerated importance placed upon their secrecy - to foreground the fact that functional and

historical explanations cannot account for the over-the-top nature of so much of what is going on.

He is correct to maintain that the excesses are an inextricable part of these elaborate rites of passage and to point out the limits of any accounts which ignore the performative features of cultural practices. Since, however, he has little to say about the historical and functional context of these rituals, his account is equally “thin.” An obvious function of excess is that it underlines or highlights the message. One thinks of the execution of Damians, the regicide made famous by Foucault (1979). The extreme violence, the ridiculously overblown nature of the drawn-out execution, quite logically can be said to have a social function; namely, to illustrate beyond any possible doubt the overwhelming and potentially horrible power of the king. Rituals “teach” or “socialize” through repetition and exaggeration and, of course, it helps if they are fun or exciting or dangerous. As all university lecturers know, if one wants to captivate one’s audience one needs to perform a lecture, complete with repetition, exaggeration, and colourful or shocking examples. To put this another way, Taussig criticizes those who want to reduce social life to utilitarian functions and celebrates the excess and how this reflects the human propensity for creation and expression, but these two goals are not dualistic opposites. They can, and perhaps must, go together. Surely, a full characterization of human actions maintains its hold on both ends of the spectrum of human meaningful activity - the practical and utilitarian, and the creative and expressive. There is no need to adopt an either-or logic on this question.

The book is by no means simplistic although the core idea that runs throughout it is rather simple. In saying this, I do not mean that it is unimportant or uninteresting. Few of us probably do reflect very often on how common public secrecy is and how central it is to our personal lives and the societies in which we live. In some cases, it is more important (or more dangerous) than others. Terror, as Taussig points out, works in this way - people quickly learn what one must pretend not to know to avoid death. In other contexts, it is more the game that captivates us - kids pretending not to know that Santa Claus does not really exist. And, of course, in between terror and joy is the more mundane reality of daily life where we pretend to adhere to formal or explicitly-avowed norms and values while frequently engaging in behaviour that transgresses these norms and values so that we can get things done. All of this is true and interesting; yet, as Taussig so effectively reminds us, at the core of many an intellectual revelation there is a stunning emptiness. The well-known story of the Emperor’s New Clothes is referred to a couple of times in the book and one wonders if the moral of the tale does not apply to the book itself. Taussig mentions the tale both because it is one example of how public secrecy works and because it illustrates one side of the dual role children play in our culture. They are celebrated both for their intense honesty, or at least their inability to play by the rules and keep the public secret, and for their credulity, their elaborate imaginations in which what adults consider truth or rationality has little place. Perhaps academia needs a few more children to remind us that often beneath the many layers of fine wordsmithing and sophisticated concept and name-dropping that we are all trained to celebrate and mimic, there may be nothing more than a very simple idea - or nothing much at all. The social sciences have always been torn by the conflict between yearnings for scientific respect-

ability, on the one hand, and the desire to emulate the arts, on the other. The appeal of the science model is that it offers the possibility of explanation and even the capacity to predict the course of human affairs. It comes, however, at the price of reducing the beauty and mystery of human life to a series of dry abstractions. Levi-Strauss’ famous algebra for myth is perhaps the best known example among semioticians of this tendency, although the “dismal” science of neo-classical economics surely takes the prize for its efforts to reduce the layered texture of actual experience to a series of lifeless mathematical equations. A good deal of social theory has similar effects. Functionalism leads towards a rather grey utilitarianism - no matter how much fun, excess and confusion an event or action involves; ultimately, it is its usefulness for the health of the individual or social system that matters. Critical theories of conflict or change can have equally stultifying effects - the excitement, danger, or craziness of a demonstration becomes the reflection or expression of sober and serious political interests. The excess of action and meaning that overflows the limits of any of these ways of understanding human action are dismissed or explained away as somehow not really central to the important and always serious business at hand.

There has always been a contraflow in the social sciences, one that seeks to represent and communicate the full mystery and enchantment of life. Poetry or theatre rather than science is the model here. With an emphasis on the performance rather than the rules of the game, the goal is to deliver to readers the feeling of joy or terror that events and actions carry. The important thing about a ritual is its performance - the sounds, smells, and sights - rather than its history or social function. The point is not to reveal deep structures and meanings but to celebrate the enchanted nature of human life.

The limitation on this side is not only that one is left without explanation, other than rather obvious generalities about the human need for creative expression. Frequently the result is a pale reflection of the event or object described or analysed. If one wants to know what it feels like to be a participant in an event one is always better off to “just do it,” as Nike advises us, rather than read a book about what it feels like to participate. No kind of writing can stand in for the actual experience. Moreover, there is a real danger of social irrelevance. It is legitimate to ask whether we should be spending what Marxists call the social surplus (either private or public) on intellectuals so that they can tell us that life is full of mystery, charm, and meaning. Don’t most people already know the answer? And if they feel the need to be charmed or engage their desires, are they not better off directly indulging themselves rather than reading an academic’s attempt to conjure a lived experience through writing? Taussig uses a discussion of cane swallowing to critique the recent academic interest in embodiment:

Cane swallowing could thus be thought of as a medium, like sound and music, for performing dis/avowal that is the public secret, performing it for its inherent excitement and danger. The metaphysical mystery of a concealing surface and a hidden depth, of appearance and truth, is subject to a Dionysian ‘eternal return’ - ‘to realise in oneself,’ wrote Nietzsche, ‘the eternal joy of becoming - that joy which also encompasses joy in destruction.’ How shallow our contemporary talk of ‘embodiment’ seem in light of this sort of disembodiment! Grab a cane! Eat the corpse of the dead man à la the Gimì women! Then talk to me of ‘the body!’ (213-14)

Of course, talking, writing, or reading about any human activities are all in some sense a poor disembodied substitute for the real thing. At the end of our days the physical which we have worked so hard to repress, especially those of us in academia, does always return and impose its own real logic upon us. Any kind of writing, even that which wants to celebrate the visceral excesses in which we wrap and play out our public secrets, is trapped in this cycle of endless return. Perhaps we can apply to all academic writing the Murinbata’s description of their religion: it is “a joyous thing with maggots at the centre” whether it is historical or functionalist attempts at explanation, or Dada-inspired efforts at characterization. Whether any of it can do justice to the secret remains an open question, but with his trademark pastiche of theoretical wizardry, ethnographic detail, intriguing associations, and tendency to obscurantism, Taussig has certainly kept the mystery alive.

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The Figured Face

Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999.

By K. J. Peters

An ethical dilemma resonates in the work of Emmanuel Levinas that is difficult to ignore. Levinas’s position and influence is unquestioned, but how is a literary critic to understand statements such as, “evil powers are conjured by filling the world with idols which have mouths but do not speak” (“Reality and Its Shadow” 12). In her book *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*, which attempts to reconcile Levinas’s discourse of the aesthetic with literary theory, Jill Robbins identifies this dilemma as an “incommensurability between Levinas’s ethics and the discourse of literary criticism” (xx). She continues: “Levinas’s philosophy cannot function as an extrinsic approach to the literary work of art, that is, it cannot give rise to an application” (xx). Which again leaves the question, what is a literary critic to do with Levinas, honored by a PMLA edition (January 1999) and the subject of a growing

number of articles and books, who calls rhetoric “preeminently violence and injustice” (*Totality and Infinity* 70), and describes poetry as “spells and incantations” and thus unethical (“The Other in Proust” 161).

As always, a number of responses are available. In her book, Robbins suggest that the incommensurability presented by Levinas’s odd relationships with the literary, his philosophy, and his approach to sacred texts “may prove to be only apparent” (xxi-xxii). If literary criticism is cast as an originary questioning, as opposed to a more totalizing approach, then the distance between Levinas and the work of art may be traversable. The challenge for Robbins is Levinas’s view of literature, and she surmounts this challenge drawing upon his own call for an ethical, nontotalizing approach to the other as a way of reading Levinas. In the following pages, I will trace her altered reading of Levinas. There are of course other responses, some of which Robbins anticipates in her book. After reviewing *Altered Reading*, I will look at two other respondents to Levinas in an attempt to understand the source of the anxiety that an ethicist among literary critics elicits. *Altered Reading* is not a book that apologizes for Levinas’s position concerning the figurative arts, nor does Robbins revise Levinas’s philosophy. Levinas remains a Judaic scholar and his aesthetic discourse remains unaltered. However, Robbins offers an intriguing possibility alluded to in her title, *Altered Reading*, which asks “whether Levinas himself might be altered in a sense yet to be determined - by his reading of literary texts” (xxiv).

In the first chapter, Robbins reviews Levinas’s analysis of the relation with the other as presented in *Totality and Infinity*. She emphasizes that Levinas does not intend to overturn “the imperialism of the same,” the desire of the “I” to absorb the other into the same existence of the one who observes the other. For Levinas, such a move would simply reestablish a different totality (4). Rather, Levinas places in question the radical asymmetry that separates one from the other. Robbins emphasizes three points which she draws on throughout her book. First, if the other is radically different and remote from vision or grasp, then the other must be thought of as separation and interruption. The interruption disturbs the totalizing view of a world of known things and beings – the same. Appropriately, Robbins reminds the reader that Levinas describes a primordial relation that conditions actual relations, but does not override the habitual economy of seeing the world as a totality. *Totality and Infinity* describes only two modes of relating to the other that are nontotalizing: generosity and language. As Robbins explains, Levinas’s ethical language is prior to language conceived as signs exchanged. An ethical discourse is not an exchange between two equivalent speakers, and it is not easily achieved. Ethical language does not bring the other closer, “it does not bridge the gap; it deepens it” (8).

Robbins’s second point of emphasis in this chapter concerns the following question. If the other is radically different and remote, “how does one write in a way that calls upon the other?” (11). In the context of Levinas’s writing Robbins asks, if comprehension is a totalizing gaze, how can one read Levinas without understanding Levinas and thereby reduce him to the same? The answer, says Robbins, lies in the question itself: “To receive the Levinasian gift of the gift, to hear its imperative, the reader must do before understanding, must be deaf to Levinas’s injunction . . .” (14). Though this seems to be merely a re-statement of the double bind presented by Levinas’s demand for ethical language, it only

appears so. Drawing upon Derrida, Robbins explains that the double bind is merely a paradox presented by the structure of formal logic. The gift is prior to logic, and the insistence upon comprehension before action (theory before practice) simply reasserts the logic by which the world is viewed in totality. In essence, the speech of the other disauthorizes in that it places my potential as a comprehending “I” in question. An “I” robbed of its ability to authorize its perceived world casts the other, who speaks and disrupts, as a persecutor (16). As Robbins notes, this is why Derrida says “Nothing is more difficult than to accept a gift” (qtd in Robbins 14).

Nonethical speech or rhetoric, to use Levinas’s term, is Robbins’s third point of emphasis. Ethical language has a straightforwardness, the face-to-face; but rhetoric, as Levinas says, is a violence “ignoring this opposition, ignoring the face” (qtd in Robbins 18). Rhetoric views the face of the other from an angle, takes the other for a theme and enters the other’s interiority as a burglar (18). Again, Robbins reminds us that ethical language, the language of the face as Levinas defines it, is prior to rhetoric. Robbins closes by proposing that the face presents a “certain figurality or rhetoricity . . . even at the level of an originary language response to the other” (19). The figurative potential of the face will prove crucial to Robbins’s later reevaluation of Levinas’s position of the aesthetic.

In the second chapter, Robbins explores the religious influence that subtends Levinas’s work and is apparent in his use of the word *trace*. She begins by examining the necessary attitude for an ethical engagement of the other. The imperialism of Western philosophy, which “insists on bringing everything to light,” results in a consumptive approach reducing the alterity of the other to self-identification (21). Yet there is a “movement of transcendence” in Western philosophy which recognizes an absent God and results in a movement away from the self without return. This is ethical work, or in Levinas’s idiom “profitless investment.” The ethical obligation to the other’s expression is to be patient and suspend expectations for a return (22). Such an attitude is necessary considering the vulnerability of the other, given as face, in the world. The face appears without giving up its alterity, yet it is always subject to the approach which reduces and returns the other as a theme. The face conserves its alterity in its expression, which is not to be confused with what is typically thought of as expression. The expression of the face does not signify anything except expression, and the only intelligible content of the direct language attitude of the face is in the form of a command and an obligation “thou shalt not kill” (25).

The approach of the other, the face and the expression of the other, is an interruption. “It disturbs absolutely, but . . . it disturbs *without* disturbing,” because as Robbins argues, it is a disturbance that “does not propose any stable order in conflict or in accord with a given order” (26). This is a bit of an impossibility, so Levinas uses the term “trace” which, in his use, does not participate in the presence/absence phenomenal structure. Robbins summarizes by saying, “The trace, as Levinas defines it, leaves a trace by effacing its traces” (28). Robbins then asks, “what are the consequences of thinking responsibility to the other as a relation to the trace?” (31). Or, how can I be responsible to someone who isn’t there?

According to Levinas, interruption of presence, signification, and the orders by which I comprehend the world do not break or prevent

rapport with the other, they enable it. If this is the case, how can one be sure if an ethical rapport with the other has ever happened? Robbins states, “strictly speaking, it does not happen” because there is no force behind the obligatory call of the other (31). Robbins continues, “such is the risk, the necessary risk of a thought that does not presuppose the other, does not merely reconstitute the economy of the same” (31). Without this risk, argues Robbins, the alterity of the other evaporates into the same once again. Robbins closes the chapter by examining Levinas’s attempts to speak the trace in the example of Moses before the immanence of God. In *Exodus*, Moses is afraid to look upon God, then on another occasion when Moses asks to see God, God refuses. For Robbins, Moses’s relation to God is an example of a rapport with the trace, “precisely because it is an experience of transcendence, it is missed” (37). She goes on to argue that Levinas’s reading of *Exodus* demonstrates that the spiritual narrative of divine revelation is itself “exposed to interruption” and therefore ethical (37).

Levinas’s understanding of God as “not contaminated by being,” concludes Robbins, allows for us to think of God as “a differential constitution of (textual) traces, as the other-trace” (38). Moses’s experience demonstrates the relation with the trace and, states Robbins, we can “think God, in Levinas’s work, as the *name* - unpronounceable if you like - for the difficult way in which we are responsible to traces” (38). We are still left with Levinas’s stark statements concerning the poetic, by which he means all figurative arts, that would seem to excuse him from literary criticism. For Levinas, to turn to the intoxicating figure is to turn from the face and cut short the living rapport that may emerge in an ethical relation with the other. However, Robbins proposes a defense for bringing Levinas to the reading of literature that is best described as a manner of reading Levinas. In chapter three, Robbins begins to lay the foundation for this defense:

If figure, rhetoric, mimesis, the literary were not what Levinas takes them to be, then it might be necessary not to turn *away* from figure, as Levinas does, but to face the figure otherwise, as language’s own most figurative potential, as that which is most distinctive to language, that is, to face language as ethical possibility (54).

To make her case, Robbins locates Levinas’s bias against aesthetic figures in his distrust of Christian conceptualizations of Judaic traditions. Arguing that Levinas’s Judaic thought must be excavated from beneath Christian concepts, Robbins turns to Levinas’s non-philosophical writing which provides the resources for an ethical criticism that addresses the face of the other as a figure that happens in language (54). Judaism is text dependent because of the second commandment prohibiting the making of images. The effect, according to Robbins’s reading of Levinas, is that “Judaism thinks the ethical. But precisely to the extent that it thinks the ethical, it finds itself lacking” (44). Like Moses before the burning bush, Judaism focuses on the word but perceives no image (44-5). Christianity, argues Robbins, oriented towards the internal drama of personal salvation, emphasizes the world to come at the expense of inter-human relations in this life (47). Christianity’s forward-looking neglect reduces the inter-human world of faces into frozen figures. At issue for Levinas is not simply the turning from the face of the other, but a violence against the possibility of an ethical relation by favouring the figure over the face. This is why Robbins sees a Levinasian criticism as much more than a condemnation of the poetic: “The task of criticism becomes all-impor-

tant: it serves to reintegrate the *inhuman* work into the *human* world, to detach it from its irresponsibility" (52).

In chapter four, Robbins begins to assemble what could be called a Levinasian criticism by considering the originary rapport with the other that is "the very opening of the question of ethics" (55). To do that, she advances the proposition that the face has a rhetoricity, made in the first chapter, by asking "can there be a figure for the ethical? A figure for the face?" (55). Robbins recognizes that "to figure the face is to de-face it" (57). However, she also sees that to encounter a face as face is to encounter the face speaking in language. The face is remote and its expression provides no intelligible content. And yet, as Blanchot says, it is "speech without comprehension to which I must nonetheless respond" (qtd in Robbins 62). How to respond is the challenge and the threat to which Levinas speaks. The face, as it appears to be part of the world, is subject to the murderous comprehending vision of those who apprehend it; yet the face expresses a resistance to its own consumption and murder. This is the 'no' or the 'thou shalt not kill' which Robbins notes is the only intelligible expression of the face according to Levinas (63). Robbins reads the resistance of the face as a citation or a figure:

The face's primordial expression is a *citation*, that is, it is characterized not by phenomenality, but by the structure of the mark, with the constitutive absence that implies. Moreover, the 'voice' delivers a commandment from an immemorial past, accessible to no present: 'To see a face is *already* to hear . . . [T]hou shalt not kill' (DF, 8). Thus, when Levinas gives the face as voice here, again he gives the face as (nonphenomenal, nonplastic, ethical) *figure* (67).

Robbins argues that Levinas's understanding of the face is "to some extent face-mask or figure-face," which leads to the question Robbins has been working up to for some time, "what is figure, if there can be face in it?" (68). With this question, Robbins problematizes the face/figure, ethical language/rhetoric binary which seems to excuse Levinas from literary criticism. The question Robbins seems to answer in the asking is, if literature is not merely expression but is also the resistance of face made manifest, is it still figure or rhetoric in Levinas's terms? In the second part of the book, chapters 5-9, Robbins pursues access to the ethical, of Levinas's understanding, through the work of art. And she draws upon Levinas's reading of Blanchot, Laporte, Celan, and Agnon to make her case. Her arguments are not against Levinas, nor does she attempt to show that Levinas underwent a sea change during his life. Rather, she makes her case with an altered reading, like Moses before the burning bush, of Levinas.

Chapter five begins with a review of Levinas's view of the aesthetic. Robbins notes that Levinas often associates poetry with terms of distraction such as intoxication, ritual, magic, and witchcraft (76). For example, Levinas argues that "the rhythm" of an image is one of the ways responsibility to the other is taken away. The rhythm is the way an image overwhelms the audience and catches them up carrying them away. Thus, critical thought and, says Levinas, "initiative and freedom," are erased (qtd. in Robbins 86). The work of art poses another threat to the ethical relation, which Robbins identifies as participation. Participation is a mode of thinking that disregards contradiction, it is the ability to confuse one for another, or one for a different species despite obvious contradictions (86). The movements of rhythm and participation (78-9, 84, 86) are the important processes

by which works of art and even rhetoric remove the possibility of ethical discourse. Levinas aligns poetry with both and argues that ethics must break from participation, turn from the idolatry of the image, and refocus on the interhuman. In Levinas's words, "every thing that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion" (qtd. in Robbins 88). Robbins closes this chapter by stating that Levinas comes to see aesthetics as that state of the world, dominated by vision, which the spoken word awakens the subject from. In speaking, the subject exposes herself or himself in relation to the other (89). For Levinas, such speech is spoken as a prayer and is ethical in that it interrupts "my existence as a subject and a master" (qtd. in Robbins 89). The prayer pulls the subject from the aesthetic dream of totality, and poses the exteriority of the speaker before the other. How then, asks Robbins, can we maintain the separation between the pose of exteriority spoken as prayer and the exteriority of the subject dissolved into the participation of rhetoric? Following Derrida, Robbins states that there must be a necessary, general contamination between what appears to be two distinct poles of experience, ethical speech as prayer and speech as distracting image. "That is to say that there is also the possibility of thinking the ethicity of poetry, or of thinking the ethical and aesthetics together, or thinking in a literary text, as Levinas himself does . . . the transcendence of the other in 'the proffered word,' the word of the other that teaches us" (90).

Chapter six is a demonstration of how Levinas draws upon literature in his approach to the *il y a*, the 'there is' or, in other terms of Levinas, the "irremissibility of existence" (qtd. in Robbins 92). Robbins notes Levinas's citation of Hoffman, Rimbaud, Huysmans, Zola, Maupassant, Racine, and Shakespeare in his attempts "to say the otherwise than being" while at the same time "preserve its ontological insecurity" (95). Reading Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure*, Levinas states that the book "opens with the description of the there is . . . the presence of absence, the night, the dissolution of the subject in the night" (qtd. in Robbins 96). The distinction between Levinas's description of the 'there is' as opposed to what Levinas describes as Blanchot's crying of the 'there is,' says Robbins, demonstrates the "problematic relation with the *il y a*" (97). In reading Blanchot's cry, Levinas finds a resemblance between the performativity of the cry and his own description, but the question arises, doesn't Levinas's reading drain the performativity from Blanchot's cry of the 'there is?' (100). This is Levinas's double bind which Robbins formulates as, "when Levinas 'says' Abraham, he 'does' Odysseus" (91). Or, in simpler terms, when Levinas calls for an endless patience that expects no return of the other, he makes the circular trip to the other and back.

At stake is the relation with the *il y a*, and a way out of the double bind in which Levinas appears to be caught. Robbins again argues that the double bind must be re-seen by moving outside of the logic of the world and back through Christian idiomatics to the Judaic spiritual and ritual life. Compared to Christianity, Jewish ritual life appears to lack "the affective power, the anguish of self-loss, and the exaltation of self-recovery, not to mention the storied character of Christian existence" (110). However, Robbins reads Levinas as saying the Jewish ritual life does not lack the spontaneity of the inner life, but rather puts into question the ability to possess and read one's own inner life (111). Far from lacking, Judaism contributes "an alternative in-

telligibility" which recalls the relation to others outside and beyond one's own internal life. As Robbins says "the passion that distrusts or interprets its own pathos would be precisely the ethical contribution of a "reinscribed Judaism" (111). Pathos, suffering or the cry of existence is not where the ethical becomes legible. Rather, as Robbins again states in a question that proposes its own answer, "is it not precisely in impossibility that the ethical experiences that go beyond pathos become legible? (116). Robbins would seem to suggest, it is in the inability to possess one's own inner life and suffering, the inability of writing to capture the *il y a* that ethical experiences become readable. If it is in the inability of writing that the access to the ethical is found, and if Levinas must resort to art to inscribe his philosophy, then perhaps as Robbins says at the end of chapter seven "it is no longer certain that we can call poetry 'poetry' in the sense that Levinas determines it, or in an aesthetic sense" (130). For Robbins, the first line of *Totality and Infinity* is a crucial hesitation that serves as a suppressed ethical meaning in art. Between "the true life is absent" and "we are in the world" Robbins sees a middle ground which the entire text presents. A middle ground between what Levinas calls the violence and alibi of metaphysics "that situates elsewhere the true life to which man, escaping from here, would gain access in the privileged moments of liturgical, mystical elevation, or in dying" and the violence of the "philosophy of immanence in which we would truly come into possession of being when every 'other' (cause for war), encompassed by the same, would vanish at the end of history" (qtd. in Robbins 119). In the remainder of chapter seven, Robbins argues that it is the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, including the revised first line of *Totality and Infinity*, that allows Levinas to make this strategic hesitation. Given Levinas's view of poetry, the apparent question is why use a poetic line to open his text? Robbins argues that, true to his view of poetry, Levinas reads Rimbaud's line "The true life is absent, we are not in the world" as an attempt to overturn its meaning:

He ventriloquizes the first phrase of the couplet and alters the second, by deleting 'not' and by adding the adversative 'but'. His is the trope of contradiction. By reading the line thematically, as an *illustration* of the desire for transcendence, in order to dismiss it, he necessarily elides the more complex significance it may have in Rimbaud's poetic work (124).

The line comes from Rimbaud's poem *A Season in Hell* which recounts a number of life failures, criticizes the desire for transcendence, and ends with Rimbaud's renunciation of his own poetic efforts. Robbins continues by suggesting that the poem and Rimbaud's renunciation of poetry after its writing has an ethical dimension (126). Levinas appears to acknowledge an ethical dimension in art when asked during an interview "how does one begin thinking? Levinas responded:

from the reading of books - not necessarily philosophical, that these initial shocks become questions and problems, giving one to think. The role of national literatures is here perhaps very important . . . in it one lives 'the true life which is absent' but which is precisely no longer utopian (qtd. in Robbins 126).

The opening lines of *Totality and Infinity* and the above comment by Levinas appear to support Robbins's reading that poetry is not what Levinas takes it to be, but rather may provide "the opening of the question of the ethical" (127). In any case, it is clear that Levinas finds in Rimbaud's poetry an ethical dimension that serves in the writing of his ethical philosophy.

Robbins is consistent and careful, as is proven by the way she begins each chapter with a review of her previous arguments and a detailed analysis of the impediments to her attempts to claim a place for Levinas within critical discourse. Most of the time, Robbins analyzes not the opinions of a rival or contrary critic, but Levinas's own words. The final chapter follows suit. Beginning with a review of Levinas's writing about art in *Totality and Infinity*, Robbins argues that on occasion Levinas makes exceptions to his own renunciation of art. One such exception is art that deals with the Holocaust of which Levinas repeatedly speaks positively (133). Robbins argues that the art of the Holocaust does not represent a contradiction nor an example of Jewish chauvinism. She sees such art as one of many exceptions that lead her to the position, "with regard to Levinas's literary and artistic exceptions, . . . art that makes the ethical difference can no longer be conceived as aesthetic" (134). One exception is the writing of S. Y Agnon, which, says Levinas, resonates in the scriptural context of the past and the modern context of Agnon's own writing "precisely," says Robbins, "the way in which the other signifies" (139).

Agnon's writing also opens to the ethical in its mirroring of midrash interpretation. Midrash is a search for problems, a posing of questions and a search for knots in scriptural texts. If no knots are found, one is posed which calls for an untying. These knots are crucial, says Robbins, as they "are cruxes, hidden meanings, sometimes mystical meanings" (140). However, tying and untying risks destroying the cord which one tries to straighten. Robbins sees Agnon's writing as having "the ability to indicate an unrepresentable past" (141). Agnon frays the knot of substantiation. In this way, to use Levinas's words, Agnon "breaks away from a certain ontology" (qtd. in Robbins 141). This may explain why Levinas holds that Agnon's writing portrays a life that "does not make up a world" thought with the ideas of being (qtd. in Robbins 141-2). Levinas also speaks favorably of Celan whose poetry "goes toward the other" (qtd. in Robbins 144). For Levinas, Celan's poetry seems to forestall, via disruption, the improper naming of the other, which is one of the charges Levinas lays at poetry's door. The Levinas-Celan relation is remarkable, argues Robbins, because in his writing about Celan, Levinas appears to countermand his own condemnation of art as merely rhetoric. According to Robbins's reading, Celan's poetry "negotiates the incommensurability that prevented art from being originary enough in the first place to be ethical" (146).

It should not be surprising that Robbins ends this chapter with Blanchot, Levinas's friend and critical interlocutor. Both Blanchot's blending of discourse and reason and Blanchot's "dismantling of classical and Romantic aesthetics" seems to have turned Levinas toward a reevaluation of his view of art, argues Robbins (152-3). Levinas's reevaluation appears in an essay quoted by Robbins entitled "The Poet's Regard" (1956), concerning Blanchot's literary criticism:

We do not go from the thing to the poetic image by a simple neutralization of the real, nor from every day language to 'the image of language' which would be poetic speaking - by diminution. What is required, after Blanchot (although he does not utilize the term), is a prior transcendence . . . in order that things may be apperceived as image and language, as poetry. The image precedes, in this sense, perception (qtd. in Robbins 153).

Robbins closes the book in a single paragraph soon after this quote. And it can be said that the entire book has been working up to this sin-

gular, yet powerful, piece of evidence in support of her argument. Robbins ends by asserting:

The polemical vehemence with which Levinas had earlier characterized the image is no longer apparent in this summary of Blanchot's subsequent understanding of the image. This suggests that, on the basis of reading Blanchot, Levinas has modified somewhat his understanding of the work of art, not so much as regards its ontology than as regards its possible relation to ethics (154).

Quandaries of Aesthetics in Recent Critical Literature

Attached as an appendix to *Altered Reading* is an essay by Georges Bataille entitled "From Existentialism to the Primacy of Economy," translated by Robbins. She says little concerning this essay except that it represents Bataille's formulation of the "convergence between Blanchot, Levinas, and himself around the thinking of the *il y a* (the "there is"), the return of presence in negation (xvii). However, the essay had more impact than this. It appears to have allowed Robbins to develop her arguments concerning Levinas's view of the "there is," the failings of existentialism to transcend and thereby approach the "there is," and the possible approach and ethical figuring of the "there is" that Robbins reads in Levinas's use of the literary to construct his ethical philosophy. This ethical approach is best demonstrated in Blanchot's cry of the "there is" and Levinas's description of the cry as discussed in chapter six. Also, Robbins draws many quotes from Bataille's review in other areas of her argument. It is not hard to imagine that Robbins's translation of Bataille's essay served as an impetus for a great deal of Robbins's impressive work.

In her introduction, Robbins states "any approach to the question of the relationship of Levinas's philosophy to literature has also to deal with the incommensurability between Levinas's ethics and the discourse of literary criticism" (xx). By a large measure, this incommensurability is due to Levinas's own position with regard to the figurative arts. However, by her careful reading of Levinas, Robbins is able to bring her reader to the same conclusion as Blanchot:

How can philosophy be talked about, opened up, and presented, without, by that very token, using a particular language, contradicting itself, mortgaging its own possibility? Must not the philosopher be a writer, and thus forego philosophy, even while pointing out the philosophy implicit in writing? (45).

Levinas counters his own views of the figurative arts, and not surprisingly with Blanchot's genre-cracking work, when he resorts to a philosophic expression to speak of otherness and the *il y a*; happenings that defy philosophy's gaze yet appear in figurative writing. Robbins makes a solid yet nuanced argument that requires the reader to adopt the patience and generosity which are part of Levinas's ethical philosophy before her rereading of Levinas begins. Therefore, I fear that readers who are suspect of, or unsettled by, poststructuralism and the recent ethical turn may not read past the first 20 pages, and this dilemma brings me to another incommensurability. This second incommensurability is not brought about by Levinas's antiaesthetic discourse, but by the obstinacy of the artist's, or the critic's, vision of the other.

The January 1999 issue of the *PMLA*, which is dedicated to ethics and literary study and features the work of Levinas, is bound by an image of the law and the law's enforcer on the cover. The choice of this image is telling, because it summons to the discussion of literature a common resentment to the law, implying judge-

ment, and ethics, implying prohibition. Such resentment is echoed by Gary Peters in his criticism of Levinas entitled "The Rhythm of Alterity." At the end of his article, Peters (1997:15) says:

Art will not be judged, and in particular it will not (and should not) be cut to the measure of the ethical, even when, as in the case of Levinas, the ethical plunders art's own body for the rhythm of alterity sensed therein and subsequently appropriated for foreign ends (15).

It will not be judged, continues Peters, because art "has always already forgotten the ethical and, indeed, the philosophical." Leaving aside 'art's own body' for the moment, it is clear that Peters's accusation is formulated on the same grounds as Blanchot's and Robbins's praise of Levinas. Where the later two see an opening up of philosophy or an attempt to think and 'say' philosophy and ethics otherwise by drawing upon art, Peters (1997:9), humming with indignation, declares "the aesthetic origin of some of Levinas's grounding ideas ultimately endangers the ethical purpose which they are later made to serve." Specifically, Peters (1997:9) accuses Levinas of refusing "to allow the aesthetic its own alterity or rhythm." Peters's argument is worthy of examination for what it says of the artist's desire to hold on to the body of art and keep it from the cold hands of the law and the unfeeling hands of the ethicist.

Peters's assertion that Levinas denies the alterity of rhythm relies on a reading of participation quite different from that of Robbins. While acknowledging Levinas's view of rhythm as a distancing function of art, Peters reads Levinas as suggesting that rhythm possesses an anarchic alterity in that it breaks the monotony of the same formulated by a continuous melody. Peters (1997:10) goes on to argue that for Levinas, the aesthetic sensation of rhythm is a dispossession in which the self is captivated and passes to an anonymity:

The peculiarity of Levinas's aesthetics of rhythm concerns precisely the anarchic character of the exotic pulse and, in particular, the way in which the transcendental ego loses its intentional grasp and is carried away.

According to Peters's reading, the self is not carried away by the aesthetic experience of rhythm, but carried away in rhythm as an exotic pulse of being. In rhythm the alterity of the other is retained as a disruptive, anarchic, aesthetic event which, argues Peters, is the opening to the ethical. This is significantly different from Robbins's reading of participation, taken from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. Robbins argues that participation is a mode of thinking that takes an image for an individual. Robbins also uses the phrase, "the viewer is carried away," but in her reading it is not the viewer that is carried, but the attention of the viewer that is moved away - as if seduced - from ethical engagement with the other (86-8). Where Robbins reads a distraction by rhythm, Peters sees being and alterity expressed as an arhythmic pulse.

It is against this pulse, which Peters (1997:13) argues is "musicality fundamentally linked to otherness" that Levinas apparently sins. The phrase "plunder art's own body," as used by Peters (1997:15), speaks loudly, but it may say more than intended. Levinas is accused of plundering not art, but the body of art. A body manifested in this essay as "the musicality of being" (Peters 1997:9). In making the accusation, it would appear that Peters calls for redress. If, as Peters (1997:15) argues, "the alterity of the aesthetic is here reduced to the same by being sub-

jected to the violence of a possessive hermeneutics and by being forced to speak the language of an alien morality," then the only proper redress would seem to be a restraining order on Levinasian ethics, so that the body of art may play as it would free of the ethicist's plundering. That is, if the perceived crime is in fact a plundering - I am not convinced that is the case.

We should not be surprised if the crime with which Peters charges Levinas echoes the charge some may hear Levinas laying at the feet of practitioners of the figurative arts. Levinasian ethics, and more importantly the ontology that results from the infinite relation with otherness, removes forever the body and the expression of the face of the other from the gaze of the artists. As always, artists and writers are free to thematize the other, but now with Levinas's words filling the pages of journals that were once unburdened by ethics, the price of such vision is a just relation with the other. I am not convinced that Peters's primary concern is that Levinas plunders the body of art. The charge makes the preposterous claim that prior to Levinas the body of art remained untouched and was never forced to speak alien concepts under duress. I do think Peters expresses the real frustration of artists and writers who take Levinas's work seriously enough to find themselves confronted with the choice of Moses - when you want to behold the other, you can't truly see, but if you don't look you can't figure the other.

Confronted with such a decision, it is easy to see an artist or writer jealously protecting 'art's own body'; both the work of figuring that claims a right to vision and the face and body that is given by vision - the other and otherness. One way to defend the figuring work of art is to place within the work, in this case musicality, the very alterity that Levinasian ethics obliges us to honour. If such an argument holds, Levinasian ethics folds in upon itself. Peters's defensive move is in response to the perceived threat of Levinas whose words 'plunder' in that they take from art its very essence, representation, and whose words despoil the pleasure of art with the threat of ethical condemnation. Perhaps this is why Peters (1997:15) closes his essay by asking Levinas to remember "the radical silence surrounding ethics."

Peters is not the only one who finds the recent ethical turn, the centurion at the gate, a menace. In his essay titled "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," Derek Attridge (1999:29) also addresses the Moses dilemma faced by the artist and writer. But rather than shooing Levinas from the aesthetic party, he tries to engage Levinas in a way "appropriate for my time and place." And yet like Peters, Attridge (1999:29) wants to hold ethics at arms length:

The usefulness of a nonmoral discourse of ethics is that it can provide insights into the fundamental conditions of the moralpolitical domain, the world of rules, programs, categories, without being reduced to them.

Attridge's objective is to consider the relation between the cultural obligation for innovative production and the obligation to respond to "cultural artifacts with fidelity and justice" (1999:20). Like Peters, Attridge wants to hold on to the subject, production, and performance of art, but unlike Peters, Attridge is not inclined to disregard ethical concerns in his consideration of the freedom of the aesthetic experience.

Attridge argues for an aesthetic ethics in which a creative, ethical engagement with the other transforms the other into the same, but in so doing the same, the schemata and classifications of accommodation, are creatively and ethi-

cally altered in the awareness of their failure. The alteration of the same by the transformed other is, according to Attridge (1999:24), similar "to the one that occurs when a writer refashions norms of thought to realize an inventive new possibility in a poem of an argument." However, before he can propose an ethical transformation of the other into the same, he must begin with an other and a relation with the other quite different than that of Levinas. Attridge's description of the other is similar to Levinas's. For both, the other is foreign, beyond the grasp and incomprehensible. However, Attridge's (1999:23) other is other "because it has not yet come into being," but as it is "realized it necessarily ceases to be other." According to Attridge (1999:22), the other that is not realized is beyond experience, but the other that I experience is produced by my experience of the other within a relation:

If the other is always and only other to me, I am already in some kind of relation to it, and this means that it participates with me in some general, shared framework. Otherness, that is, is produced in an active or eventlike relation - we might call it a *relating*: the other as other to is always constitutively on the point of turning from the unknown to the known, from the other the same. (An entity without this relation would simply not impinge on me; as far as I was concerned, it would be nonexistent.)

Attridge's other exists within a relation, to me, that has already constituted the other as experienced, and therefore, well on its way to sameness. It is important to be clear that Attridge does not claim to experience the other, but the alterity of the other in transition to or disruption of the same. Nevertheless, the concept of otherness described above does not fit with Levinas's notion of other which can only be perceived as trace. For Levinas, long before the other is apprehended as a face, the infinity of the other has departed and quit the face altogether. Attridge's creative process of relating and creating the other is incompatible with Levinas's ontology, because the other as discussed by Levinas is beyond the relation in which things can share, impinge or relate.

It is important to examine the creative, ethical relation with otherness described by Attridge because it is an expression of the artist's and writer's desire to hold on to the body of the other in an ethical embrace. Within the relation described by Attridge, I apprehend the other, not as other but as a human being with a form similar to my own. Echoing Levinasian ethics, Attridge states that one can respond to the other by acknowledging the other's incomprehensible and impenetrable subjectivity or by accepting the other's unlimited subjectivity. However, Attridge (1999:24) claims such responses are to the generic person and not to the singular individual whose "familiar contours of a human being" are recognized in their accommodation to my schemata. The other, according to Attridge, can only be experienced when the viewer recognizes that the individual human being's uniqueness calls into question attempts to make otherness known. It is worth repeating: Attridge argues that the existence of the other is dependent upon a relation in which I view the alterity of the other and make the other known. It is also worth noting that according to Attridge, only an individual whose unique contours break with my usual schemata and categorization can be experienced as an other. It would seem that for Attridge (1999:24), the radical alterity of the other is not a product of their ontological and phenomenal heterogeneity to me, but is a product of a relation to faulty schemata and classifying systems:

It is in the acknowledgment of the other human Being's uniqueness and therefore of the impossibility of finding general rules or schemata to account fully for him or her that one can be said to encounter the other.

Attridge (1999:24) argues such an encounter is ethical because it holds the potential to alter the usual schemata and categorizing systems, "inventively changing myself and perhaps inventively changing a little of the world."

As I stated earlier, Attridge's concern is the just and ethical response to innovative cultural artifacts. He is not attempting to excuse or defeat Levinas's ethical philosophy, and so frames his ethics around the innovative production of the other and then moves on to consider other cultural productions such as literature and poetry. However, the desire of the artist and writer still resounds in his work. In Attridge's discussion, the ethics of production, figuring and bringing the other into existence is not in question. If the other is other, and if the artist is obliged to ceaseless innovative production, then our ethical responsibility lies in the ethical production of the other as being in the world of the same. In Attridge's ethics of creative engagement, the artist or writer is free to view the other, plunder even, as long as he or she is aware of the other's disruption of the habitual economy of classification and definition which reduces alterity to the same. The problem is, for an artist or writer already engaged in the project of rendering otherness comprehensible, it is difficult to take note of such interruptions as ethical/creative moments and not writer's block. Attridge's argument is similar to that of Derrida, who proposes in "Eating Well, or the Calculations of the Subject," that if you can not avoid eating the other, then the question is how to eat well. The challenge for practitioners of the figurative arts is to recognize their own appetite and listen to the sound of their chewing. As Attridge (1999:30) states in closing his essay, "ethics makes impossible demands," Levinas's ethical ontology even more so.

I chose Gary Peters's and Derek Attridge's articles not because they are the only expression of the artist's desire to maintain the freedom of the artistic gaze of the other and the freedom of artistic production, but because they were the most recent expressions of this desire. Perhaps I was less generous with Peters's article because his effort seemed like a search for a way to uninvite Levinas from aesthetic discourse. Attridge engages Levinas but merely as a departure point for his own creative aesthetic. Robbins's book is a careful examination of the difficulties Levinas leaves with us. Robbins continually asks us to reconsider Levinas's brilliance by assessing the wisdom of Jewish thought and scholarship, excavating it from beneath Christian conceptuality which has, she would hold, reduced its significance and obscured its wisdom. This metaphor is carried throughout the book, and appropriately so. But what is also carried throughout the book is a desire to excavate a love and appreciation of literature and art, which Robbins seems to feel a great mind such as Levinas's must have held, from beneath Levinas's own writings and negative statements concerning art. A salvational effort on Robbins part, but not an egotistical or self-serving one. Blanchot's effect upon Levinas, as demonstrated by Levinas's essay of 1956 "The Poet's Regard," demonstrates a change in apperception of art by Levinas, and prior to that, as Robbins shows, his perceptions of art were influenced by rabbinical studies and Jewish thought. The brilliance of Robbins's work is not the application of Levinas to literary studies, but the effort to read extensively, carefully for the knot that will not come lose. And hav-

ing found a few, Robbins poses some more knots. Robbins struggle with Levinas is perhaps more enlightening in this work than Levinas's struggle with art.

I have no answer for the ethical bind Levinas leaves to us. Like Moses, we are stuck before divinity, seeing what is not in the world. But unlike Moses and, thanks to Levinas, we find ourselves in a world occupied with burning bushes which cannot be consumed. However, I am not convinced that the double bind is anything more than merely apparent. The bind which seems to offer two distasteful choices may simply be a manifestation of the logic of vision. But even if we were forever doomed with underdeveloped Polaroids of the other, would that be so bad? I am reminded of the camera shy Amish who reportedly see cameras as a tool of the idol maker. Perhaps attention should be paid to such respect for the terrible power of vision to contain the other. I am not sure we have to give up taking pictures, but to argue for the absolute necessity and the legitimacy of art's access to the other and then to claim that art produces merely images is a bit disingenuous.

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Video Semiosis

Marcel Danesi, *Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.

By Jennifer Ellen Way

How can scholars interest students in learning about a particular way of making sense of the world? How can they write engaging accounts without reducing the complexity of the cultural, social, and historical contingency of concepts and practices they associate with semiosis, a method some academics acknowledge as a field of specialization, many universities recognize as a program of study in its own right, and applications of which scholars in the sciences and humanities articulate diversely?

In *Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics*, Marcel Danesi examines semiosis through the conceit of studying a video that documents Cheryl and Tod, a heterosexual couple in their late twenties, mutually enjoying their dinner date in a "fashionable modern day restaurant" located in a North American city (2). By advancing this situation, Danesi sidesteps the staid and lackluster presentation we might expect of an introduction to semiosis (e.g., Chapter 1: Signifier, Chapter 2: Signified, Chapter 3: Sign, Chapter 4: Signification ...). Indeed, he steers his project onto the high road. Not only does Danesi predicate semiosis on social pleasures readers may associate with middle to upper class "twenty-somethings" enjoying the good life (the consumption of expensive food and alcohol, ciga-

rettes, ambience and, in a sense, one another), he suggests that semiotics is "the discipline that endeavors to understand the human quest for meaning" (1). He proposes to link the former to the latter in ten chapters, the titles of which describe a wide range of fascinating topics: the universe of signs, how humans represent the world, why we put on make-up, what is language, metaphor and the making of meaning, why we tell stories, meanings of spaces, the meaning of clothes and objects, the artistic nature of the human species, and advertising, pop culture, and television. As proposed, this project couldn't be more delightful. It promises to be interesting and thought provoking for students and professors alike. Yet, Danesi's inattentiveness to the complexity of his strategy - he narrates his discovery of signs in a video and analyzes them for readers - foils what might have been an important discussion about forms and practices by which we semiotically comprehend everyday life - including our presence and participation therein.

The Insignificance of Material Form

One of the biggest disappointments I had in reading *Introduction to Semiotics* was that as I finished the last page, I realized the author had failed to consider that the video he claims to study for his readers is a cultural form having materiality and associations with specific traditions and practices, dimensions of which may issue semiotically or otherwise contribute to what counts as a sign. Astute readers may infer as much, that is, if, as they read, they realize Danesi conflates "reality" and signs mediated by the presence and activity of a videographer, video camera, and Danesi himself performing as both narrator of an account and the author who stages a narrative for readers. To realize this, readers must attend closely to an important aspect of Danesi's strategy, virtually the only one he uses to foreground the video.

Typically, he begins each chapter by suggesting he has stopped the video on a passage displaying yet another facet of semiosis in action ("let's pause the tape for a second to ponder a few relevant questions," 131; "as we allow the tape to go forward," 131). Language like this works to involve readers in Danesi's conceit. In addition, it may indicate to readers that the study in which Danesi suggests they are participating depends on them "watching" video representations of a couple on a date instead of sitting in the same room with a couple they observe becoming engrossed in one another. Art historian Alex Potts suggests, "There is a long tradition of cultural common sense that considers the visual image to be somehow more natural, offering up a replica of reality rather than a conventionally coded representation of it as in language" (1996: 21).

In fact, Danesi suppresses video as an example of visual culture "conventionally coded." Consistently, he treats objects, spaces, people and images as signs full of yet transparent to meaning, lacking material form and presence. To wit, a semiotician is "intrigued by seemingly trivial forms of discourse because ... they reveal meaning ..." (66). What counts as trivial? What are the material and physical forms in which discourse becomes available to us? How do such forms participate in semiosis, and thus relate to signs Danesi claims to discover and analyze? To introduce the topic of the "self," Danesi discusses portraits that he likens to "probes of the face, aesthetic interpretations of many meanings that the 'human mask' is capable of conveying" (54). After surveying evidence from societies for whom

portraiture figured as a prominent category of visual culture, Danesi cites photographs that Dorothea Lange produced in the Thirties, when she worked for the United States government's Farm Security Administration. For the author, the significance of Lange's work rests mainly on its ability to communicate ideas without mediation catalyzed by the materiality of form, genre, or practice. Lange, he writes, was "among the first to portray the poignancy of everyday life through the faces of real people ..." (55).

What is wrong with this analysis of a picture? To be sure, the author posits signs as having three dimensions - physical, referential or representational, and conceptual (11). However, will readers realize how these dimensions interrelate, or what links them to meaning? Danesi misses many opportunities to explore mediation. I do not mean "mediation" in its abstract conceptualization as "codes," which is one of the author's terms for groups of signs or sign systems, but as something specific in materiality, function, tradition, and social and cultural significance. The author's lack of discussion on this subject puzzled me because in the middle of his book I read that "forms are recognized as legitimate meaning-bearing signs" (44). Today, many art and cultural historians take pains to investigate how the activity of someone who constitutes something as a sign occurs in relation to what certain technologies make possible (or what users and viewers perceive that a cultural technology makes possible) through conditions of materiality and use. For instance, we might consider material and formal aspects of video to include features of video in its thing-state (as video camera, video player, and cassette). As we watch a video, we might attend to the size of the screen on which we watch, the grain or clarity of images, the color of what we see, the placement of the camera in relation to its subject, the speed of the shot, and so forth. What might count as material characteristics of video could depend on what equipment the videographer used and when she used it. For example, artist and critic Margot Lovejoy points out that not until the late 1960s did the Sony Corporation manufacture the video camera and recorder known as the Portapak (1997: 97), a technology the characteristics of which included a tiny black and white image issuing as poor (broadcast) quality. In addition, as we watch a video, we may bring to our watching certain expectations, associations, and habits we relate to this medium as the medium, in turn, makes possible certain kinds of narratives as opposed to others (Klein 1996: 379).

On the one hand, Danesi stipulates that "forms are recognized as legitimate meaning-bearing signs when they fit structurally into their respective codes" (44). He insists that a sign has "some physical feature in its make-up that individuals recognize as keeping it distinct within some specific code" (43). Perhaps related to the issue of some physical feature is the "literal base" on which the author claims that meaning "and metaphor is added ... so that discourse can be embellished" (93). By "code" Danesi means a way readers make sense of what they "observe" in the video passage on which he "paused"; yet the author does not specify how form is specific to code, whether or not either is palpable, or exactly how codes "mediate the relationship between people in a society and are, therefore, effective shapers of how we think of others and ourselves" (5). He complicates "code" when he implies it relates to theatre or theatricality: "code provides a script for each person to assume a role" (5). Are readers to literally understand Danesi that codes issue as dialogue? Truly, what is "the nature of the script that is used by people to act on that stage

[of everyday life]?” (14), or the “human need for a master script” that Danesi ascribes to semiosis? (16).

Readers must grasp what Danesi means to explain as he introduces terms because he depends on each to perform like a building block contributing nuance to the larger structure of semiosis as a process of finding and interpreting meaning. If, like me, readers consider that the way Danesi handles “code” is vague, then they may have problems understanding the importance of terms he relates to this one. In fact, “codes” lead to “texts,” as the former weave together and so produce the latter (6). By the time readers encounter “discourse,” “ritual,” and “slang” (in chapter 5), they may no longer remember how the author defined “code,” let alone grasp how this concept relates to new terms at hand (79-82).

To reiterate, Danesi tells readers that forms are important in some ways. On the other hand, he permits contributions form makes to denotative and connotative dimensions of semiosis to remain unacknowledged and unproblematic. Truly, is he comfortable in enabling readers to conflate representations specific to video, and experience lived in “real” time? Is he sensitive to this conflation, but willing to overlook it because he presumes that his readers grew up in a world wherein the mass media promotes itself - and is sometimes accepted - as (a) reality? It is interesting to speculate about what conditions have made it possible for academics to elide the active, material presence of a technology, such as the video camera and those who use it and watch its results, as source, form, technology, and practice.

Individuals and institutions making a living from one kind of technology associated with contemporary American visual culture are guilty, too, of suppressing the presence of other kinds. Think of television. To a line up of shows such as *Candid Camera* and *America's Funniest Home Videos*, shows that foreground one kind of camera producing visual representations (while they elide the presence of television cameras in the studio broadcasting videos that “star” in the shows), television networks have added *Real World* and *Cops*. Although these shows depend on video, the networks render absent its active presence from the shows' titles. What might we learn if, in a semiosis of symptomology, we address *Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things* as a sign of American culture, a culture that privileges images as signifiers waiting to receive a signified (say, from a particular advertiser) but, at the same time, is willing to suppress the physical reality and authorship (including authorial and technological labour productive) of those signs? Some scholars decry this tendency in academia today. Potts even warns: “Everything becomes code and structure and any suggestions of what in common parlance is understood as material reality is bracketed out – whether this be the material substance of the sign as object or the physical identity of the object to which the sign is understood to refer” (1996: 26).

Were there other reasons compelling Danesi to treat video as the protagonist in his narrative, yet suppress so many dimensions of this cultural technology with which individuals living in North America at the beginning of a new century might be familiar? In addition, Danesi ignores the presence of the videographer and himself (as the individual determining those parts of the video that readers “see”). Perhaps, after all, links between means and examples of representation, and reality, elude the author. At

the end of the last chapter (Chapter 10) he reveals the purpose of his book: “to illustrate what a semiotic study of the system of everyday life would entail ...” (195). On their own, readers will have to speculate why the author implies that studying video amounts to studying a “system of everyday life.”

The Significance of Form

Since Danesi frames semiosis within a video he “watches” with his readers, refers to many kinds of visual culture, including photographs and sculpture, and includes a chapter on the artistic nature of the human species (Chapter Nine), it is worth comparing what the author says about semiotics and how members of the art world introduce this subject.

In the previous section, I argued that Danesi suppresses the materiality of video as media and form and, instead, privileges signs “in” it. Jan Mukarovsky (1988: 1-2, 3) considers the work of art as a bridge across which spectators pass into meaning and collectivity. He treats physical aspects of art as a signifier, a “thing-work” he privileges for its potential to invoke “this other reality for which the work of art is a substitute.” Arriving at the “other reality” depends on a universally homogeneous encounter with a work of art as well as viewers' expectations that art is, in their perception of it, and first of all, materiality. Further, the materiality of art performs as a lower order, an entry into the perception of meaning, the higher level of which is the meaning to which materiality leads. Mukarovsky's account of semiosis diverges from Danesi's. In Mukarovsky's, meaning devolves on a continuous oscillation between the work of art as “as a sign composed of a sensuous symbol created by the artist” and “the total context of so-called social phenomena: philosophy, politics, religion, economics, etc” (1988: 3, 4). For Mukarovsky, semiotic analysis articulates for art viewers how two entities relate: “the work of art is intended to mediate between the author and the collectivity” (1988: 1). In contrast, Danesi absences both the materiality of video as “a “thing-work” and the videographer who used it.

In essays he published in the 1960s, art historian Meyer Schapiro raised prescient questions about materiality and signs. For instance, how - for whom, when, and in what situations - does the materiality of imagery become significant? In what ways can we describe the process wherein materiality or form signifies? In “On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content,” Schapiro (1966: 43) points out that by assigning form in art a (tacit) role of performing as a transparent vehicle through which meaning results (for the viewer), we thus “appreciate forms without attending seriously to their represented meanings.” Here, Schapiro anticipates Derrida's critiques of the frame as neither inside nor outside art, an area associated with two dimensional works that scholars ignore and so render as an invisible common sense, what art historians Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson qualified as “a zone of aberration” (1991: 193). Schapiro proposed what must follow: “A picture would be a different image of its object and would have another meaning if its forms were changed in the slightest degree” (1966: 41-2). Thus, Schapiro ground the semiotic significance of art in its materiality. How can we bring this to bear upon *Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics*? One possibility is to consider how the images Danesi treats as signs would differ were they not presented in video, as Danesi claims, but in another medium. In “On

Some Problems in the Semiotics of the Image-Sign and their Role in Constituting the Sign,” Schapiro (1969: 3) discusses the “image-field” by which he means a rectangle framed as a distinct plane of surface having definite boundaries and features like horizontals representing ground lines. He wants to make strange – estrange viewers from - material features of art rarely treated seriously as “sign-bearing matter” (1969: 26). Some thirty years ago, this art historian problematized how and in what circumstances do we, or do we fail to, charge material, form, technique, or technology as a sign.

Semiosis as Activity

More recently, Bal and Bryson reiterated that “the nature of what is to count as a [significant] unit is far from obvious” (1991: 194). They wondered, how do viewers of visual culture link “material” to “ideational” or context, signifier to signified? In what ways can we “trace the possible emergence of the sign in a concrete situation, as an event in the world”? The authors proposed that art historians study reception as an active, creative process. “Reception” offers a framework in which we can “investigate how works of art are intelligible to those who view them, the processes by which viewers make sense of what they see” (1991:184). By urging scholars to examine how viewers decide what counts as, and perceive, cultural artifacts, Bal and Bryson hoped to promote the understanding that “a sign, then, is not a thing but ... an event that takes place in a historically and socially specific situation” (1991: 207).

Danesi casts interpretation as “familiarity with meanings of signs in specific contexts, with the type of code to which they belong, and with the nature of their referents” (26). I wonder in what ways familiarity issues from meaning or a particular act of interpretation. How does one become familiar with meanings of signs in a context? (Bal and Bryson [1991:175] questioned the nature of “context” for art historians and described “context” as “a text itself, and it thus consists of signs that required interpretation”). Are Danesi's readers to understand that first, semioticians discover signs, then they proceed to unlock codes containing their meaning? (Below, I'll return to the notion of “container”). Near the end of *An Introduction to Semiotics*, Danesi explains that “codes are dynamic, flexible systems, adaptable to the whims of individuals and entire societies” (195). Based on how he proceeds and what he proposes elsewhere in the book, readers may conclude otherwise. Signs are stable and permanent. Signs are things rather than processes, objects - not events. Suspended in the medium of video, signs are patient and generous. They await Danesi to recognize and benefit (readers) from them (“Martha's videotape has still much more to offer the semiotician,” 147).

Whose Videotape?

The author implies some signs are so recognizable that they have become part of the natural order. A good example is the sign “woman.” Danesi does little to illuminate the complex cultural and social situations in which this sign occurs and is deconstructed by many scholars today. If anything, he reconfirms this sign as part of the order of common sense, the constitution and ideological functions of which remain invisible in his narrative. In “watching” the video, he accomplishes this by feigning to come upon the sign of woman as a component of public space that anyone might confront, witness, and study with ease.

Another way Danesi slights semiosis as “an event in the world” concerns Martha. Only parenthetically do readers learn she was responsible for making the video of the young couple on their date. In fact, by the end of the book, the author dispenses with even cursory references to Martha and her product (such as, “let’s return to Martha’s videotape,” 55). Readers may wonder in which ways does the video belong to Martha? To her understanding of the world? To herself as a subject whom may reproduce certain ideologies through her work? Video artist and critic N. Katherine Hayles (1996: 262) once warned: “Because they have bodies, books and people have something to lose if they are regarded solely as informational patterns, namely the resistant materiality that has traditionally marked the experience of reading no less than it has marked the experience of living as embodied creatures.” For readers, what moral or ethical dilemmas could result because the author of *Introduction to Semiotics* neglects to address the videographer as an “embodied creature” who participates in semiosis?

Bal and Bryson proposed that the subjectivity of whomever we describe as “artist” fills a cultural construction, boundaries of and the unity around which, they posit, are permeable and in flux, opening up to “potentially infinite regressions and expansions ...” (1991: 184). Like many scholars, they defer to psychoanalytic theory, especially the work of Jacques Lacan, in order explain that not only is “artist” a sign constituted in a particular culture and society having historical dimensions. In fact, many scholars and critics of visual culture study links between artist, self, and electronic media. Kathie Rae Huffman (1996: 202) concluded: “With the endless opportunities to document life around them during the past decade, individuals have become so familiar with the act of observing space and time – in electronic form – that the medium has become infused with new meanings and opportunities to understand the self and others.” Here, Huffman posits difficulty in trying to separate electronic form and subject positions.

Furthermore, Bal and Bryson (1991: 200) posited that any subject position is, ultimately, a sign, the significance of which develops as we perceive this sign in relation to others (“the subject’s entry into the networks of signification”). They cited this point to illuminate the presence and activity of individuals who constitute authorship as a sign: “Semiotics argues that it is only in concrete material circumstances that signs operate; but it also raises a number of questions concerning the tracing of these operations in reception-analysis” (1991: 187). Questions to which they refer (1991: 186-88) include: “from where, from what position, is the [art historical] reconstruction [of reception] being made?”; what institutional forces (in art history) identify reception with one group rather than another; what codes are necessary for viewing as a process, and who has access to these codes? In an overview of semiosis intended for students of visual culture, Alex Potts (1996: 17) underlined the point: “We all know that we do not literally see meaning in a work of art. Rather something compels us to view it as having significance which is not simply to be found there in a thing, and this compulsion clearly has a lot to do with the habits of our culture.”

As Danesi erases Martha from her video, he claims for himself a dual authorial position. He performs as narrator of the account of Tod and Cheryl and as author of the book. Thus, he establishes himself and readers who associate with him as voyeurs in a surveillance situation, that is, in relations of power (“the semiotician is, above all, a people-watcher,” 2). Signs related to intimacy, sexuality, and availability become available

when authors and readers “watch” from afar (“the task of the semiotician is to look everywhere for the ‘signs of life,’” 195). No less troubling is that Danesi considers this activity empowering. Semiosis “allows us to filter the implicit meanings and images that swarm and flow through us everyday, immunizing us against becoming passive victims in a situation” (21). Readers may surmise that inoculation from social ills issues to those who practice semiosis.

Word choices and phrasing invoke other kinds of distance – not the same thing as mediation – and thus separate readers as viewers of the video, from the videographer and cultural technology with which she worked. For instance, Danesi implies that what his readers see becomes available at their leisure, when they may identify components of a “hidden story” (1) or “unravel the meanings of symbols” (1). Although he acknowledges that “the notion of ‘mental depth’... is a product of metaphorical meaning” (93), nevertheless, and consistently, Danesi casts many parts of his discussion as a dialectic – one he never examines - between exterior and signifying interior, surface and signifying depth. When, for example, he extends the model to subjectivity - “The self, like a mask, is a sign standing for the human individual” - he fails to acknowledge for whom the individual-as-self-as-mask “stands” as a sign, what facets of individuality are so signified, what is signified (or not), and in what “concrete situation[s], as an event in the world” (1991: 53) does the mask as façade pass as or substitute for a self positioned behind it?

There are still other ways Danesi in which distances himself and his readers from semiosis. I noticed that he relies upon stability and totality as features of the situation he observes. “Semiotically, culture can be defined as a container of the meaning making strategies and forms of behavior that people employ to carry out their daily routines” (24). Danesi fashions the cultural component of semiosis structurally, as a container pre-existing the semiotician, one that stills and keeps its subject, thus presenting it through certain conditions enabling a particular kind of scrutiny. Elsewhere, the author distances readers from the subject of his book by forgetting to relate semiosis to the topic at hand, as occurs in an extensive discussion about metaphor in Chapter 5. I’m not suggesting the discussion is uninteresting – to the contrary. The complex distinctions Danesi proposes between abstract and concrete concepts are especially insightful (98-102). However, he does not bring these insights to bear on semiosis. While he admits, “everything I have written in this book, too, has been structured by metaphorical cultural models” (104), will readers have closed *An Introduction to Semiotics* already, because they could not identify its subject?

“Unraveling” Meaning: From Culture to History to Biology

Finally, I want to consider more carefully how Danesi examines semiosis. Cheryl and Tod smoking is one of the first activities on which he “pauses” the video and sets about “unraveling what ... [it] means” (2). The way he proceeds reminds me of Annales School scholarship, especially the social histories of Fernand Braudel. Semiotic “unraveling” involves Danesi relating (video representations of) Cheryl and Tod to examples of social history he considers similar in meaning. Examples include “historically based link[s] between smoking and romance” (2) and references to many events of the past and present, far and near. He begins in the fifteenth century

when tobacco comes to the New World. He introduces twentieth-century health warnings and laws pertaining to smoking. Along the way, he wonders why people smoke (this has to do with the “social history of sexuality and gender,” 3). Without articulating persuasively how what he presents relates to the scene at hand, or to semiosis as a practice, Danesi ruminates on mating. He tells readers that the videographer recorded “a courtship display, a recurrent, largely unconscious mating ritual rooted in gesture, movement, and body signals that keep the two sexes differentiated and highly interested in each other” (4).

Why is this relevant? Moreover, why does the author address “signifying order” by recounting an “inclination to tribalism” that he qualifies with remarks like: “A modern society is a super-tribe” (16) and “all systems of everyday life have tribal roots” (19)? Repeatedly, he returns to the tribal and prehistoric, concepts that, for him signify origins, specifically, the origins of a meta-code. Or, he conflates culture and nature. The subtitle of Chapter 9 reads “the artistic nature of the human species.” In this chapter, Danesi traces the origins of art to the Old Stone Age (165). Oddly, by declaring that “visual art predates civilization” (173), he raises doubts about whether or not the “Old Stone Age” was part of civilization.

Virtually every concept Danesi considers significant to semiotic analysis – speech and language (67), language as an “edifice of knowledge” (69), syntactic structure (72), to take examples from just one chapter, provides him with an opportunity to ignore the video “at hand” and scavenge social history for examples he considers related and thus relevant. Art historian Lyckle de Vries offered the following as a description of the misapplication of iconography, and it elucidates the approach of the author of *Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things*:

Reasoning such as this, starting from an intuitive interpretation of formal elements, jumping from these to a level of general culture, and then descending from there to reach conclusions on the level of individual objects ... (1999: 49).

What will readers learn as Danesi digresses from calling readers’ attention to a sign, to defining concepts related to semiotic analysis, to surveying a patchwork of examples of cultural and social histories having an unclear relationship to the topic with which the author began the chapter, to revisiting tribal or preliterate societies or numerous events he associates with past civilizations? (In Chapter 9, metaphorically, he throws up his hands – “Art is everything to everyone,” 164). In the manner of Braudel, Danesi renders social history as quantification (example after example from many times and places) evoking the appearance of scientificity and a comprehensiveness the author may hope will suffice, at one and the same time, as social history and its explanation (as a way to account for the sign). Readers need have no uncertainty that social history is Western history: “The most effective writing code is, of course, alphabetic” (77).

The author writes: “given the long history of cosmetic make-up and hairstyles, it is now a straightforward matter to understand in semiotic terms why Cheryl wore her hair long” (52). Never mind whether or not it is problematic to tell novices of a method that something related to its application has become “a straightforward matter.” Can and should semioticians “do” history in order to explain a sign? In each chapter, the author recites social history yet pulls back from specifying – in time or place, for instance - the

visual representations he claims to study in a video. Instead, he reaches for allusions to timelessness and universality. He clarifies little when, on the last page of the book, he transposes semiosis into anthropology: "This book has attempted to argue that the nature of Homo Sapiens cannot be understood primarily in biological terms" (198); and, "We can know ourselves today only by knowing how we got here" (199). Why does this semiotician situate his subject diachronically, yet insist on its ultimate transcendence from history? For semioticians, what counts as history? Does it inhere in the practice of semiosis? Is history in the sign? Is the sign timeless?

Chapter 8 provides a welcome exception. Here, the author ruminates, synchronically, on the ways that cities, McDonald's restaurants, and malls today function as spaces having many dimensions of social significance (141ff). Elsewhere, he provides brief but interesting accounts of contributions Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce made to semiosis (11-13), and features of structuralist and post-structuralist thought (17-18).

Based on Pott's explanation of Saussurian semiotics, we might consider Danesi a fan: "Saussure is not concerned with analyzing the signifying process as such, and within his schema the latter effectively becomes a simple operation in which a signifier evokes a signified" (1996: 19). Yet, Danesi is silent about whether he considers his account partial to the theories of a particular individual or school. Nor does he demonstrate how readers might practice the theories of Saussure or Peirce. Since, by and large, Danesi does not indicate how his selections from social history illuminate semiosis, or consider what historians can know about semiotic activity in the past, or wonder in what situations semiosis and historical study intersect or diverge,

Danesi obfuscates what he hopes *Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things* will demonstrate most: "the basic goal of semiosis ... [is] to identify what constitutes a sign and what its meanings are" (11).

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