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Seeing Bifocally: Media, Place, Culture

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1. Bifocality

Bothered by dimming eyesight in his later years, Benjamin Franklin had to use, he wrote, "two pairs of spectacles which I shifted occasionally, as in travelling I sometimes read and often wanted to regard the prospects." To avoid the trouble of switching them, he had lenses cut so that both sorts would fit in one frame. "This I find more particularly convenient since my being in France, the glasses that serve me best at table to see what I eat not being the best to see the face of those on the other side of the table who speak to me; and when one's ears are not well accustomed to the sounds of a language, a sight of the movements in the features of him that speaks helps to explain; so that I understand French better by the help of my spectacles" (Franklin quoted in Van Doren, 1968:637).

Benjamin Franklin knew already in 1784 that a dual vision to the near and far helps in the understanding of a foreign culture. Bifocals were invented in a set of strikingly ethnographic circumstances: blurred vision, traveling, reading, novel food and language. As a rider in coaches, Franklin wanted to both read the texts he had brought with him and observe the novelties on the horizon. As a stranger, he wanted to check unfamiliar food and understand unfamiliar words. Franklin's bifocals addressed for him what are the more general anthropological dilemmas of near sight and far sight, interpretation of detail and orientation to outline, pre-text and new text; they allowed him to switch his gaze rapidly between close up signs and distant prospects.

An astute and wealthy businessman, Franklin had good reason to want to keep his eyes on both the local and the global. Perhaps capitalism itself (whose spirit Franklin typified for Max Weber) requires such a double surveillance of space: local profits (private property), remote markets (freedom of exchange). Throughout Franklin's century, new kinds of bifocal vision of the social world arise; the eighteenth century is the seedbed of what we have since learned to call mass media.

Two dominant narratives in recent social thought treat this period as axial for the rise of nonlocalized forms of action and vision. In his Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989) Jürgen Habermas describes the appearance of a new principle of political organization in the eighteenth century: "publicity." Whereas the feudal order consisted of secret deliberations by the rulers and public spectacles for the ruled, the modern state is supposed to make its deliberations visible to the public and legitimate through reason so that the rulers and the ruled are one. The public face of feudal power had been processions, public executions, and the court's pomp-filled, personality-laden fanfare; the constitutional state, in contrast, reveals itself to the public's gaze through organs of sober publicity, particularly but not only journalism, which are supposed to nourish the public sphere and make intelligent discussion possible. Publicity, as the principle of public access to state decisions and of glasnost within social intercourse, is the legitimating idea of modern democracy and signifies, according to Habermas, a shift in the nature of political power: instead of the fiat of the king's arbitrary power comes the reason of the public's opinions. The remaining danger, as Habermas notes, is that the public sphere may be "refeudalized" by the market and the state: that is, the organs of publicity which are supposed to dispense enlightenment to the public may revert to being the stage-managers of spectacles which keep the citizens in awe, instead of in discussion. In Habermas's panorama of mid to late twentieth-century public culture, feudal spectacle is always threatening to take over democratic information, and the mass media, as the Janus-faced agents of both news (which is supposed to instruct the citizenry) and advertising (which is supposed to sell commodities to consumers), find themselves pawns in larger political and cultural battles.

Michel Foucault's story in Discipline and Punish (1979) about the rise of new kinds of politics and vision in the eighteenth century is strikingly similar, though with a gloomier spin. Habermas's publicity becomes Foucault's panopticism. "Royal power" showed itself via flamboyant torture of the criminal's body; modern (or "carceral" or dis-

ciplinary) power, in contrast, is based on the (self-)surveillance of the citizen's soul. The aim of royal power was to make one body (the king's) visible to all people; the aim of modern power is to make all bodies visible to one person, as typified in Jeremy Bentham's architectural designs for a penitentiary (or hospital, school, or barracks) called the Panopticon. A guard, hidden in a central tower, can peer into each cell of a concentric prison. The inmates, never knowing whether they are being watched at a given moment, internalize this gaze and become guardians over their own behavior. Every citizen becomes a prisonmaster and every soul a panoptic gallery. For Foucault, citizens who think they are acting before the public gaze are only implementing a new kind of subtle discipline of themselves and of the social body. The Panopticon is the nightmare of, to speak with Habermas, systematically distorted communication: the inmates, says Foucault, are objects of information, not subjects in communication.

Whereas Habermas takes the increasing visibility ("publicity") of the social body as a step toward a more enlightened polity, Foucault sees it as a trap. However one positions oneself with regard to the Enlightenment and its attending notions of emancipation and visibility--and it is not an easy question to sort through--both Habermas and Foucault can be read as narrating the rise of modern mass media, those representational modes that promise to depict otherwise unseeable totalities to ordinary citizens. The institutions of conversation in Habermas's bourgeois public sphere (coffeehouses, salons, table-societies) would not exist without the press, which he calls "the preeminent institution of the public sphere"; and it doesn't take much squinting to see in Foucault's panopticism an allegory of invasive media. Emergent eighteenth-century forms such as newspapers, novels, maps, encyclopedias, dictionaries, statistics and demography, scatterplots and pie charts, zoos, museums, the census, and visual panoramas all fabricate representable totalities beyond the direct acquaintance of any mortal--such as human knowledge (l'encyclopédie), the English language (Samuel Johnson's dictionary), or national birth or death rates. Such media begin to democratize the sovereign gaze. Though it is quite plausible

to take the twentieth century as the critical moment when the range of the visible outstrips the unaided eye for large portions of the population (Ludes, 1992), practices of graphically representing large numbers have a longer ancestry reaching at least to the eighteenth century (Tufte, 1983).

It is no accident that the novel and statistics both decisively arise in the eighteenth century. More ancient lineages of these practices can of course be traced, but the moment of cultural efficacy for both begins in the Enlightenment, with the rise of a middle-class reading public and rationalized state bureaucracy. The novel and statistics are each a narrative mode answering the problem of how to display a cross-section of a quantitative complexity. One uses narrative, the other aggregation. Both enact--and depend on--a new apprehension of space and time: the possibility of envisioning spatially dispersed events at a single moment in time. (This conquest of simultaneity in representations is of course loosely coupled to the integration of regional and world systems.) A novel weaves between several strands of plot with the device of "meanwhile," while statistics does so with a "cross-section." A newspaper, likewise, aggregates the diversity of its material first and foremost by date (Anderson, 1983). The newspaper, whose current form also arises in many respects in the eighteenth century, falls between novels and statistics as modes of social reportage (Davis, 1983). The tension between story and fact, as Michael Schudson, borrowing a page from Walter Benjamin, has argued, structures classic twentieth-century journalistic genres: human interest stories and stock market reports, narrations of sporting feats and box scores (Schudson, 1978). The polarity of narrative and data marks the twin limits of modern social description, with many hybrid forms between. Academic battles between number-crunchers and tale-spinners are only a local variant on this larger theme.

Given a sufficiently broad definition, it is easy to see mass media in a wide variety of social formations, not only modern, electrified ones (e.g. Menache, 1990). All social orders in history have probably conjured grand pictures that outstripped anyone's

powers of experience or sensation, but modernity is distinguished by the graphic portrayal of actualities. We generally do not suppose the stock market report belongs to the same order of truth as older stories about the antics of Zeus or the wrath of Huitzilopochtli: we imagine that the one sort of totality is endowed with a density of empirical reference that the other lacks. Moderns have figured out how to make their gods empirical. The forces that shape our world may be portrayed in story, image, or statistic, but modernity claims that they can be cashed in for the hard currency of observation. What is uniquely modern is the claim of indexical verifiability embedded in our representations of social totalities. This claim informs the diverse practices of the mass media, which we should not conceive only as television, cinema, radio, newspapers, and magazines, nor as the even more various apparatuses of information and entertainment, but as all practices of social envisioning, reporting and documentation, including statistics, accounting, insurance, census-taking, polling, the work of social services and of the social sciences. Part of what it means to live in a modern society is to depend upon representations of that society. Modern men and women see proximate fragments with their own eyes, and global totalities through the diverse media of social description. Our vision of the social world is bifocal. Institutions of the global constitute totalities that we could otherwise experience only in pieces, such as populations, the weather, employment, inflation, the GNP, or public opinion. The irony is that the general becomes clear through representation, while the immediate is subject to the fragmenting effects of our limited experience. Our sense organs, having evolved over the ages to capture immediate experience of the local, find themselves cheated of their prey.

Modern media pose the question of the continuing relevance of place as a marker of intelligibility in social description. Habermas's bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century London is already a diasporic assembly; a virtual public may be the only kind of public there has ever been. But received images of political action (the Athenian Pnyx, the Roman forum, the London coffeehouse, the New England town meeting) presuppose

the appointment of places for face-to-face conversation. Media and mass communication seem to threaten the existence of local sites of talk. In this essay, I am interested in the waning of place as a container of experience. Clearly, nomadic cultures are ancient, and signs have long been dispersed, but electronic media do present new challenges or at least exacerbate old ones.

Recent debates in anthropology about the practice of ethnography reflect the dilemma of lost semiotic homelands. The issue of power and complicity in the dialogic encounter and the subsequent crafting and circulation of the ethnographic text is implicitly undergirded by the loss of faith in place as an epistemological ordering principle. Recent internal critiques of ethnography have attacked its myopic attention to the local and the dispersion of cultures into the crisscrossing flows of capital, people, technology, ideas, and media narratives across the globe (Appadurai, 1990). Reading glasses, it is argued, are not enough; ethnography must survey the global circulation of capital, signs, bodies, and commodities, and see that circulation as fundamental, not extraneous to the local worlds traditionally favored by ethnography. The art of writing cultures must "break with the trope of community" and the dream of immediate presence (Marcus, 1989).

In its beginnings, ethnography focused on local worlds that were seen, sometimes conveniently so, as dangerously delicate in contrast to the scale and power of engulfing cosmopolitan orders: the Aztec language and culture chronicled by Sahagun, the Scottish ballads collected/invented by MacPherson under the name of "Ossian," the "Indo-Germanic" language and lore of the brothers Grimm, the Magyar music of Bartok, the coastal Indians of Boas, and so on. An implicit doctrine about the relation of culture and place prevailed: spatial confinement stood for the native's enchantment, tradition, culture, and primitive economy, as opposed to the anthropologists' enlightenment, modernity, science, and developed economy. Spatial mobility stood for the ethnographer's privilege,

and territorial restriction became the symbol of ethnographic intelligibility. Ethnography became, in part, the task of finding pockets of knowability within a dizzy world system.

One of the traditional appeals, then, of ethnography is that it claims to offer the anthropologist an apparent escape from the bifocality of the social world of origin, an epistemologically unencumbered eye for things social. It offers a social world whose scale is commensurate with face-to-face inquiry. Leed (1980) argues that much academic discourse on folk and preliterate cultures has been conditioned historically by a implicit longing for an alternative to the industrial-capitalist homeland of academics. One goes abroad to find what one lacks at home. In the Mato Grosso of Brazil or the Sepik River region of New Guinea, it was supposed, one may find a pristine culture, undisturbed by the world-wide circulation of matter and mentalities of the last five centuries, a world ultimately knowable even if initially bewildering. The commitment to the local is part of the dream of finding a "knowable community" (Williams, 1973), legible and visible in its entirety. Strangeness is dialectically related to the familiar, and anthropology, as the study of the strange, has long had the underlying moral and political project of critique on the homefront (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). Every frontier, as James Carey (1989) has quipped, has its backtler.

Shifting the burden of autobiography from self to other has long been one of anthropology's sublimated dramas, from Malinowski onward. The other tells our tales in alienated form. If we are to heed the call to be more frank about the effects and commitments of our discourse and interests, then we might try to explore the nature of our "own" culture, trying not to overlook whether (1) the proprietary "our" is possible (2) the implied unity of the "we" is defensible and (3) the name "culture" fits the strange suspension between what we academics, de facto members of a world-wide professional and cosmopolitan class whatever our political sympathies, can experience for ourselves close-up and what we experience via the globalizing discourses and images of the media. If ethnographers once assumed that the local is both autonomous and readable, neither as-

sumption quite holds in the privileged environments most people who write and read such essays as this one live in. Thanks to various media of social representation, the local environment is often seen fleetingly while global events--war in Iraq, pollution in Eastern Europe, famine in Africa, or strife in the Middle East--are portrayed as coherent, if often violently foreshortened, visions for our gaze. (Here I bracket the crucial questions of the accuracy and ideology of those representations: my concern is the pretense of presenting those images as knowable wholes.)

The authority of the local, in contrast, is often undercut by image totalities, just as it is by economic ones: I may see blue skies, but the satellite picture on the TV news tells me a huge storm is on its way; almost everyone I talked to face-to-face in Iowa City, a Democratic stronghold, said in 1988 they were voting for Dukakis, while the national polls--much more accurately--foretold Bush's election; I may know many people moving east, but the demographic data shows the slow west-southwestward drift of the US population. Local knowledge, the erstwhile prize of ethnographic inquiry, is constantly discredited as a guide to living in the modern world for being too concrete, too mired in immediacy. My embodied experience belongs to a smaller orbit than that of the "information" I receive from various media of social representation: in fact, transcendence of our bodies may be the peculiar hallmark of "information" (Benjamin, 1936). Immediate experience of the local, long prized by common sense as the only experience worth having, is, for people in certain class positions, no longer a trustworthy guide to practical life in the modern world. Close reading can no longer claim to be an authoritative interpretive method of a social world whose shape is discernible only through general visions offered by agencies of social reporting. The irony is that one's own eyes provide fragments of "society," while media representations are panoramic and total.

In contrast to most of our fellow humans in history, the global has become a graphic part of our local experience. People have always had the wildest things in their heads, but modern media of social reportage claim to provide an actuality and realism of

social imagination, as above, that is quite unprecedented. The representation of a social totality that transcends the circumference of an individual's possible experience is always potentially a political act, an act of constitution or revelation: for many social critics in the nineteenth century, to document society was already to protest it (Engels, Dickens, Zola, Riis, Tarbell, etc.). But in the late twentieth century, few believe they can describe current social conditions armed with nothing but camera and pencil: the gap between what we can know face-to-face and what we have to know via the big picture makes any foray into social portraiture an exercise fraught with epistemological, existential, and political difficulties. And yet we can "see" arctic airmasses on the evening news or national taste in breakfast cereals in USA Today graphics. We need to understand media (again, in the broad sense as machines for the representation of social life as a knowable whole) as the court-painters of the global, as providers of a kind of sight that lifts our gaze beyond immediate experience to distant, concurrent events, as key factors in the confused local-global cultures in which we students of culture find (or lose) ourselves. We must examine how the age-old link of locality and truth been made strange for us, if not topsy-turvy.

2. Culture and mass culture

A central intuition informing two centuries of mass culture criticism is that mass culture does not respect the bounds of locality. Cultures in diaspora have been ignored or disdained. Notions of culture and place have long been intertwined. Connected with both is a third term, authenticity, which helps give the concept of culture a polemical edge which excludes certain candidates from its status--the mass media foremost among them. Raymond Williams (1959, 1985; also Hall, 1980) has of course helped us parse this term. One branch of culture's meaning refers to the totality of practices and lived experiences of a people--culture as "a whole way of life." The other refers to those imaginative and intellectual achievements canonized as somehow great or immortal--

culture as "high art." In both the democratic-anthropological and the elitist-artistic senses of the term, culture is remote, elusive, a scarce resource. Whether as "the expression of a people's experience" or "culchah," both definitions exclude the culture of the mass media (soap operas, sports, westerns, music videos, comics, parades, T-shirts) or of the middle range (collegiate sports, parades, picnics, airstream trailers, fireworks) more generally. The middle is taken as either inadequately serious or inadequately sincere. The top and bottom are authentic, but the middle is banal.

What is it precisely about the middle that makes it wanting in the department of "real" culture? First, mass-mediated symbols violate the notion that place collects an integrated culture. They travel to you electronically or by other space-collapsing means and via rationalized systems of marketing and distribution; you needn't do fieldwork in exotic places to find them. They testify less to the global variety of human practices than to the world-wide reach of economic, political, or religious empires. Traveling, goes the complaint, is no longer a guarantee of encountering densely textured symbolic differences in everyday life. Mass culture, one might say, is spread too thin to invite thick description. Second, mass culture obscures authorship. It cannot be seen as an uncomplicated expression of a people's consciousness or worldview. Whereas a folklorist could once assume that folk songs and house decorations are conscious creations people make in the context of their imaginative and material conditions, no such strong link between soul and symbol can be assumed for the products of culture industries. Mass culture is, thus, taken as a kind of alienated discourse, mediated and filtered, not pure. Notions of uprootedness explicitly invoke a romantic image of nourishing bondage to place. Third, mass culture is mediated by the market, which, as Marx noted, is governed by the fetishism created by the movement of a commodity from one place to another. The commodity fetish appears in the jump-cut of spatial displacement. It is produced with the audience/buyer in mind, rather than as immediate unconstrained labor. Again, its integrity is tarnished: the Nielsen ratings and the New Guinea tribesman's sense of a market for primitive sculpture are

both symptoms of the same disease: loss of authentic self-expression. Mass (mediated) culture, in short, violates all the tenets of pop romanticism--place, soul, and expression--and replaces them with dispersion, artifice, and the market.

The concept of mass culture forces certain commitments out of the woodwork, since both ethnographers and curators have been able to dismiss it as always on the wrong side of such dualisms as creativity vs. commerce, original vs. copy, face-to-face vs. mass communication, end vs. means, self-expression vs. market-orientation. Rothenbuhler's comments (1990) on the way that the classic distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft informs judgments about the degraded character of mass communication are apposite. "Interpersonal communication appears a primordial expression of the self and other mutually reaching out to share each other's experience. Mass communication appears to be a manufactured stimulus based on the rational calculations of those who run the media to take advantage of the attention of strangers, and, from the audience's point of view, a matter of spectatorship rather than participation, of the entertainment value of differences rather than the nutrient value of commonalities." Culture is a body's voice, mass culture is mediated artifice. Culture as conceived in its romanticist vein is the fantasy of a pure disclosure of soul (whether a nonliterate artisan or a Beethoven), the product of a laboring body (rather than rationalized mechanism), and originating within a identifiable place and time (rather than the spaceless center of a dream factory).

Culture, then, in Walter Benjamin's terms (1935), is marked by an "aura." This notoriously elusive concept is itself about elusiveness: an aura is "the unique perception of a distance, however close it may be." The aura of a work of art derives from its unique localization in space and time. The aura tracks the singular mortal body of the work through space and time. The true Mona Lisa is in the Louvre; the image of the Mona Lisa on a T-shirt, in contrast, inhabits a very different practical universe (it can be washed, worn, sweat in) and is hence unprotected by the prohibitions and "micro-adjustments" that surround sacred things (Lévi-Strauss, 1966:10). If some miraculous

technical process could reproduce the Mona Lisa exactly, molecule for molecule, so that no analysis could distinguish the two, down to the historical effects of aging and deterioration, the copy would still lack the history connecting the "true" Mona Lisa to its original authority as a relic carrying Leonardo's contagious magic across the centuries. The copy would be only a spectacle of technical ingenuity, not a moving or perplexing work of art. It would be a simulation, not an expression. We would wonder how it was done, not what it meant. It would be fit for Disneyland, not the Louvre.

That hardly anyone would dispute the very different institutional destinies of the two objects reveals what metaphysicians we seem to be in dealing with culture--in any sense of the term. Culture is evidently more than matter in motion; Benjamin alerts us to its delicate ontology. Art works are not only texts; they include their site of origin, after-life, and discursive and historical complex of valuation and reception. Identical objects can invite radically different hermeneutic stances from their audiences/readers. The Louvre painting could sustain questioning about possible reasons for the famous smile, while the Disneyland copy would be admired mainly for its amazing technical skill. The one has an author whose intent may be probed, if only in imagination, and the other is the result of a technical process. The origins of the two works are part of their possible interpretations, even of their essence. The one work is haunted by a whole texture of historical ghosts and legends, the other needs to have that supplied. Each one offers its viewers a radically different hermeneutic invitation. Indiscernible objects, pace Leibnitz, are not identical in the realm of signs.

In Jorge Luis Borges's story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," a similar point is made. A 20th-century French symbolist poet, Pierre Menard, learns the rules of Chivalry, converts to Catholicism, and learns early seventeenth-century Spanish, in an effort that can only be described as quixotic: to rewrite the Quixote without consulting the original. After Herculean efforts, Menard reproduces a few pieces of the text (that he can write only parts of the text is a comment on the "availability" of texts in different his-

torical moments). After doing all of the classic acts of historicism (immersion in source materials, mentalities, language, etc.), only to a logically absurd extreme, Menard is still unable to write the past "as it really was." Historicism stands refuted: Menard produces a new text eccentric to the original. As the tale's narrator notes, though both texts are "verbally identical," Menard's fragments "are almost infinitely richer" than those of Cervantes. What were literary flourishes in 1609 ("Truth, whose mother is history") resound in the age of Marxism and pragmatism. The setting of a sentence in history endows it with references and resonances. Whether a copy is richer (Menard's Quixote) or poorer (Disney's Mona Lisa) than the original, things cultural derive meaning not solely from formal patterning, semiotic suggestiveness, or power of statement, but from a tissue of relationships with history, time, and place.

The apparent attenuation of such a tissue is what characterizes mass culture, not the supposedly lousy quality of Hollywood movies, soap operas, comic strips, or romance novels. Scale, commerce, and mass reproduction do not affect the quality of texts (though the question of "quality" is intimately involved in the entire apparatus); they produce aura-free texts that invite people to supply their own frame of interpretation. The products of mass culture seem to come without hermeneutic "directions for use," though not without obvious ideological weightings. Benjamin, for one, found the loss of aura to be politically progressive since it opened up art, he thought, to public and collective modes of reception. Others argue that the impoverishment of interpretive resources in much mainstream media fare is debilitating politically, since it offers nothing to keep mass culture from being lazily digested into prevailing opinion. Whether TV viewers, for instance, are poets of the screen, able to rewrite narratives that speak to their own condition, or are dupes who are overwhelmingly constrained by extant ideologies and reading formations, or sometimes both or neither or something else, is hotly debated. What a booming industry of research into audience decodings of television programming has revealed is not the sweeping away of local consciousness and identity through a media-

imperialist deluge, as was widely feared in the 1970s, but rather the flourishing of localized meaning-makings, in turn shaped by a wide variety of proximate constraints, such as gender, control over TV technology, access to critical counter-discourses, education, and religious and ethnic identity (Liebes and Katz, 1990; Morley, 1992; Mankekar, 1993; Livingstone, 1994). Audiences, we have learned, resist ideologies, snooze, argue, eat, make love, party, weep, laugh, channel-surf (men more so than women), debate, and tune out in front of the television set. Audience research is, in part, the revenge of the local, the reassertion of the small-scale in the midst of space-transcending media systems. That much of this research is done in the name of ethnography suggests the perseverance of near-sight as a mode of human experience of the world, even when the objects of vision are transported from afar. Audience research suggests that localization and globalization are not just matters of physical availability and access, but of attachment and affection, interpretation and ideology, power and privilege. The romantic longing for a rooted place is often belated; only the uprooted cry for roots; the innocent know not to lament their fall. Localization and globalization are cultural processes like any other ones (Friedman, 1990).

"Mass culture," in sum, consists of what "culture" is supposed to consist of--symbols--and yet those symbols behave in ways that violate much of the work "culture" was originally supposed to do as a concept. Mass culture no longer stands for diversity of practices, for rootedness in space, place, and tradition, for the local. It defies the equation of cultural integrity and geographical finitude. We metropolitan souls living among ethno-pop, sound bytes, McDonalds, e-mail, and global circulation of patterns, people, and products, easily see ourselves as "people without culture," as Renato Rosaldo (1988) observes. Like Raymond Williams, Rosaldo notes the contradictory meanings of culture in the discourse of anthropology: officially, it is supposed to be an aspect of all human activity, and yet cultures that are spatially localized, homogeneous, and immediate are preferred. Lowland Filipinos or North Americans, for example, are branded "people

without culture." Our mobility, rationality, markets, differentiation, and multiplicity of options make our culture invisible. "Evidently, the concept of culture [can] barely describe, let alone analyze, flux, improvisation, heterogeneity" (1988:77). For Rosaldo, the creation or effacement of cultural differences is a charged gesture in a zone of conflict, not an innocent census of varieties. The cultureless are often that way as a luxury; those with cultures are often marked as such and not given the privilege of being culture-free. Hence the apparent lack of integrated cultural spaces is just as worthy of anthropological interrogation and analysis: ". . . border zones, pockets, and eruptions, along with our supposedly transparent cultural selves, are as profoundly cultural as anything else" (Rosaldo, 1988:87).

As students of culture, then, we should recognize the self in the other and the other in the self, be explicit when we blend the autobiographical and the ethnographic, and explore our spatially mobile, culturally translucent, and informationally saturated status. The rediscovery of audience interpretations revives ethnography's relevance and suggests the inevitability of localized forms of life. Bifocality may not just be a stance we should adopt as social analysts, but precisely the thing we already possess that makes our status as cultural animals problematic--and deserving of inquiry.

3. The Wall and the Castle

Franz Kafka can be read as an anatomist of the paradoxes of making an animal whose body and senses are fitted for finitude into a global being. His writings suggest that the effort to transcend a local vision is more perilous than might be expected. His stories simulate the vertigo one can feel, suspended between the range of our bodies and the totality of systems.

His "The Great Wall of China" is an extraordinary tale about imagining the state, as befits a story about the most enduring state and (with the pyramids of Egypt) the most famous state edifice in human history. In building the wall, Kafka recounts, a "principle

of piecemeal construction" was used. Two gangs of laborers would work on a small stretch, working toward each other. When the piece was completed, the laborers would not build additions on its two outer ends, but would be transferred to a completely different locale to repeat the same activity there. "Naturally in this way many great gaps were left, which were only filled in gradually and bit by bit, some, indeed, not till after the official announcement that the wall was finished. In fact it is said that there are gaps which have never been filled in at all, an assertion, however, that is probably merely one of the legends to which the building of the wall gave rise, and which cannot be verified, at least by any single man with his own eyes and judgment, on account of the extent of the structure" (Kafka, 1971:235). But why this method of building, so obviously inadequate to the professed aim of keeping out the barbarians? Kafka exploits the truism that the wall served more to keep the Chinese in than the barbarians out. "The legends to which the building of the wall" gives rise are its most important product. The great wall for Kafka is a work of spiritual social control; in other words, of nationalizing civic consciousness. The grandiosity of the project forces citizens to ponder its purpose; the impossibility of ever seeing the wall as a whole stimulated the circulation of official discourse and counter-discourses; the curious method of building made villagers into Chinese. The enforced need to interpret an enigma, Kafka knew, generates both faith and wavering. The state creates enigmas as a matter of policy to secure the good faith of its citizens, and to secure for itself monopoly rights in the representation of unseeable totalities.

Because the wall exists as complete only in the discourse of state edicts, it must constantly be imagined and reimagined. The need to build the wall with thoughts as well as stones, Kafka suggests, keeps up the morale of the supervisors, who have received exacting training in architecture, and yet are wearied by the dullness of the actual work. The movement of supervisors and laborers across the land takes them on a tour d'horizon in which they may recognize themselves as belonging to something--China--that could command such an infinite exertion as the building of the wall. In pilgrimages across the

provinces the supervisors and laborers confront the enigma of their common lot. Such reflection on such we-ness, as Benedict Anderson (1983) argues, is a key moment in the formation of nationalism. (Though Anderson's book is often taken as the voice of a soft cultural Marxism--perhaps thanks to its publication by Verso and his brother Perry Anderson's preeminent status in the British left--its central narrative of nationalism as an answer to the search for meaning in a disenchanted world is fundamentally Weberian). As in our love-lives, so in our national histories: accidents become destinies. Something as magnificently unverifiable and manifestly absurd as the great wall with huge gaps in it created the spiritual need for constant national puzzlement and allegiance. With Festinger, the discoverer of "cognitive dissonance," Kafka knew that absurd assignments generate their own rationales. Kafka is the analyst of the ways that absurdity recruits allegiances, that the state, among other institutions, dangles images of unverifiable totalities before its populace in order to keep them in a constant condition of loyal wonderment. Kafka's China has found a way to exploit the finitude of human sense perception for political ends. It sponsored a public work that could be completed only in the heart and mind of each citizen.

In the beginning of Kafka's The Castle (1926), "K" enters a village inn and finds himself accosted by a representative of the Castle, a vaporous entity whose identity remains permanently veiled in the book and thus functions as an allegory of infinity and bureaucracy. Haughtily K claims to be "the surveyor," summoned by the Castle, and the representative checks twice with the Castle by telephone. On being recognized by the castle the second time K reflects that this is propitious (since it gets him off the hook from the representative, who wants to banish him from the country) but unpropitious because it means the Castle is on to him and is giving him the chance to make his next move.

K does not know, cannot know, if he has been recognized or is only fabricating it.

This interpretive wavering before an enigmatic answer is a fundamental experience in the modern world: carrying on a fencing match with a partner who either seems to be responding but whose motives are inscrutable, or whose responses can never be verified as responses. Modern men and women stand before bureaucracies and their representations in the same way that sinners stood before the God who hides his face: anxiously sifting the chaos of events for signs and messages. The deus absconditus (hidden god) of theology no longer hides in the farthest corners of the universe; his successor has moved into the infernal machines of administration. Dante's vision of the place beyond the heavens was a kaleidoscopic reflection of spheres against spheres, a mulifoliate rose of infinitely refracted light. K, like the rest of us, peers into a place in which the reverberations are not optical but informational. (Game theory is the scientized form of this experience.) He does not know whether the permission given him to stay in the village is a mandate from the Castle itself, from some sleepy bureaucrat on the other end of the telephone trying to cover a possible failure to note K's arrival, or from the representative himself, fascinated by K's haughty certitudes. K must interpret the gestures from the Castle (if they are indeed from the Castle) with the same attentiveness that augurs once monitored the sky above the templum for the flight of birds or the fall of stars; equally, he must follow them with the same falsificationist rationality of the modern scientist, carefully peeling away alternate hypotheses, checking the data for clerical errors, wondering if the instrument was flawed or tapped the right information. To survive in the modern world, men and women must become the diviners of inscrutable others, interpret the moods of secretaries, the words of department heads, the decisions of deans and CEOs, and shake-ups in the organization of the Kremlin as if they were the language of some hidden, murky, remote god, content only to speak in darkness and in dreams.

K, as a surveyor, one who must read not only local but global signs, never knows if such signs are a coherent language expressing an overall design, or if whatever design exists is only a paranoid projection of the overactive interpreter. Are there dark secrets

hidden in the government's statistical tables, or simply the accumulation of lots of noise and little data? The signs that we read with our far-sighted lenses are all around us; they refuse to tell us how to read them. We hesitate, caught between the fear of being paranoid ("everything's a message") and the fear of missing a revelation if we act as if nothing is a message. The inability to verify for certain whether a sign is a projection of self or an utterance of other, an interpretive artifact or an objective pattern in the world, confronts a variety of social types: wizards who read tea leaves or entrails, believers who receive answers to prayers, takers of the Turing test who wager if the conversant is a human or a smart machine, or the Ks, the students of culture and society, who read the structures on the horizon as well as the texts that are up close (or in the texts that are up close).

The space that we have to discern and portray as bifocal readers of culture--as scholars and citizens--is thoroughly Kafkaesque. The world beyond the local exists as a visible totality only in discourse and image, though its fragmentary and scattered effects are all too evident in the lives of flesh and blood people. If we are to criticize it or falsify it, our only tools are more representations. We are, once and for all, bound to our bodies and their thresholds, and yet our heads swim with visions of things which we claim are real facts, not just one more item in the list of historical delusions that people have killed and died for. Kafka points to an incommensurability between the finite capacity for experience our mortal bodies possess and the infinitude that infests the reigning representational institutions of our time. Corporate financial reports, government documents, actuarial tables, omniscient narration, or the TV news might seem unlikely candidates for out-of-body experiences, but our experience is rife with objects that could be experienced only by gods; and gods, alas, we are not.

Ethnography, as the description of palpable human experience, may seem old-fashioned in a time when locality no longer guarantees the link between symbol and soul as it once seemed to. But there is the danger of the breaking through to the other side of

the sound barrier if we overcelebrate the contingent bricolage of cultural and personal identity in a delirious dance with "Mr. In-Between" (Bhabha, 1994). The improvisation of identity is wonderful if you have the cultural and finance capital to cushion you against the traumas of postmodernity, but most of the human species still lives out its days in localized spaces, dependent in various ways on people they have known for years. The means for making one's identity a poetic work are inequitably distributed. Distance from the local is often a luxury. Localities--chosen or fated--still govern the lives of most humans, even the rapidly increasing numbers with access to global, regional, national, and local media. The Anglo-Muslim immigrant opposition to Rushdie's Satanic Verses, for instance, suggests not just that some people are insufficiently enlightened (as some commentators would have it), but that (1) global flows may follow weird circuits, not just center to periphery and (2) in-betweenness can be a profoundly painful--not just playful--condition. That popular resistance to cultural artifacts may not take the form we might approve of is a necessary reminder to laborers in the vineyard of cultural studies. We should neither drain the concept of culture of its ties to place and matter, nor freeze it into absolute identity. On the need for analytic (but not existential) in-betweenness, Bhabha is right.

Though we cultural analysts must shake off a debilitating preference for the culturally contained over the mobile, the effort to gain some kind of narrative sense of our species' desperate and magnificent condition as mortal and embodied beings, to find discourses that make links to other people in other worlds, cannot be pushed aside. We need to continue to develop arts of reading the global as it pushes its way into the local, which is the age-old task of humane self-understanding. As the practice of creating social theory dialogically (Marcus, 1989), ethnography will necessarily remain a constitutive tool in our kits, as long as the necessary faith continues that we can learn something by talking to people whose experience is other than ours. We must take a gamble on the ongoing relevance of the lifeworld, however perforated it may be by the system.

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