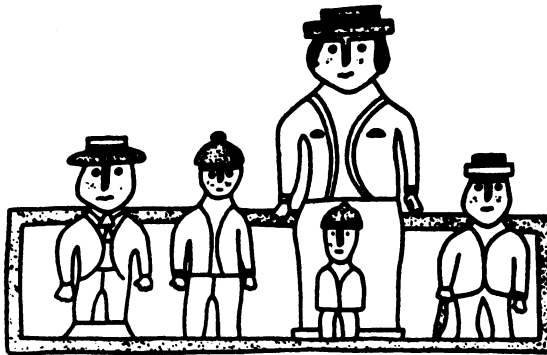


The Nervous System

Part 1: Homesickness & Dada

Michael Taussig



I know of investigators experienced in this art of diversion, which is a return of ethical pleasure and of invention within the scientific institution. Realizing no profit (profit is produced by work done for the factory), and often at a loss, they take something from the order of knowledge in order to inscribe "artistic achievements" on it and to carve on it the graffiti of their debts of honor. To deal with everyday tactics in this way would be to practice an "ordinary" art, to find oneself in the common situation, and to make a kind of appropriation of writing itself.

(Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*)

Homesickness

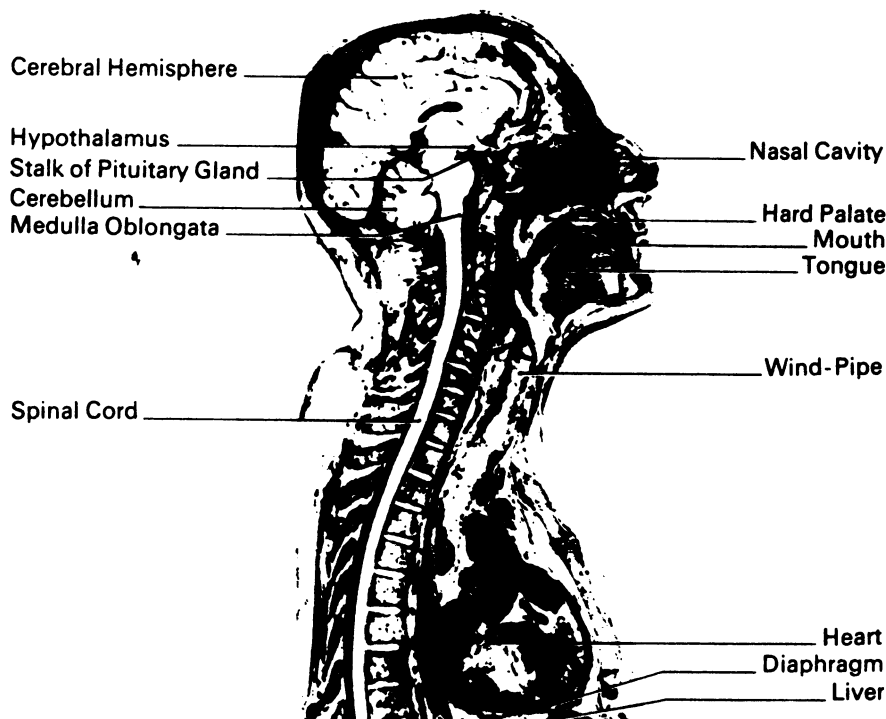
I am working on the Nervous System and it's turning out to be hard labor indeed. Sometimes I suspect it is working even harder on me than I am on it. This puts Hermeneutics and Reflexivity in a new light, since they're now exposed as a property of the NS itself and not of the individual subject — that curious entity from which many of us have grown to latterly distance ourselves. Thank God it's only a fiction. It was in Sydney, Australia, that I first saw the NS, inscribed as graffiti on the wall of a shed built for ferry passengers waiting to cross those blue-green waters to the down-town of the city. "Nervous

System." That's all it said. Nothing so portentous as "Abandon hope all ye who enter," nor as explicit. At that time, as part of my engagement with the use to which indeterminism was put by Putumayo shamanism, I was immersed in Sir Roger Casement's Putumayo reports on the killing and torturing of Indians during the infamous rubber boom of the Upper Amazon in the early 20th century. It's not easy for me to explain this, for first of all I started to get scared my self, then not only scared but incredulous. The more I understood it, the less it made sense. Worse still, it was crazy in a malevolent way, the "it" in this case starting to self-decompose and lose its identity, zig-zagging inside and outside of certainty and uncertainty, referential fixing; was it Casement's manner of representing, or was it that which was being represented? In merely asking this question, was I myself not being zig-zagged between hypersensitivity and numbness — surely the most crucial, politically speaking, property or (representations of) terror? It was then, absorbed and troubled, looking out from the ferry across the water that the graffiti once again swam into view. But this time it hit me. Yes indeed! Nervous System!¹

An odor of decadence, punk, and chronically unemployed youth, hung about much of Sydney graffiti. It's from this that much of the new politics derealizing reality stems. There are many kids there with no prospect of ever getting a job. Capitalism has not treated the Australian economy well the past decade, and there seems every indication that the country will slide into banana republicdom, a strange fate for what was generally perceived to be amongst the whitest of British nations proudly removed from them that grows bananas. Perhaps instead of the Australian flags that now, as if in reaction to this fate, sprout from every fertile field — car windows, tennis shoes, T-shirts, and koala bears — there should be a golden green banana instead? You need something like that, robustly organic and innocent, to stand up to the destabilizing effects of the NS, especially when you take into account the fact that the little white enclave at the bottom of Asia never really had a place for itself well mapped out in the world system of representations. It was an odd-ball colony from the start, a place to dump prisoners, not a treasure trove of spices or gold — except, perhaps, for whatever lay concealed by the mystery of its hollow center. But then maybe, in that juxtaposition of penal colony and vast inner land of nothingness lay treasure enough?

Medical Anthropology

But at least there's the NS. That we can be sure of. A common impulse in epistemic panic is to run for biological cover, to escape from the whirligigging of the NS, first nervous, then a system, first system, then nervous — nerve center and hierarchy of control, escalating to the topmost echelon, the very nerve-center, we might say, as high as the soul is deep, of the individual self. The massive forebrain, protuberant and hanging over the landscape, like the mushroom shaped cloud of civilized consciousness; then the mid-brain and stem with their more "primitive" (according to medical science) olfactory, memory, and autonomic nervous system functions, somehow more intrinsically central, older, and self-locating; and then, dribbling down somewhat like a kid's sandcastle, the spinal column with its branches, synapses, and ganglia. (Remember those synapses? How they crop up in the anthropology of complex societies, the relation of the local community to the state? NS as allegory.) It's a complex picture. The tissue is irreplaceable. Its cells are unregenerative. Even while it inspires confidence in the physical centerfold of our worldly existence — at least that such a centerfold truly exists — and as such bespeaks control, hierarchy, and intelligence — it is also (and this is the damndest thing) somewhat unsettling to be centered on something so fragile, so determinedly other, so nervous.



Mid-line section through a man

Medical Anthropology has not been slow to resolve this nervousness, whether through the white-coated certainties of Sociobiology's promises, or through the exemplary explanations of the magical power of shamanism and of healing ritual, the Primitivistic turn of face to Sociobiology's Modernist aura. But might not these attempts to resolve the unsettlement of the NS make it even more nervous? Might not the whole point of the NS be it's always being a jump ahead of us, tempting us, through its very nervousness, towards the tranquil pastures of its fictive harmony, system, and wholeness, thereby all the more securely energizing its nervousness?

Let us turn to those exemplary texts of shamanism and healing ritual, those marvelous texts without which any syllabus on Medical Anthropology is radically un-whole; namely Victor Turner's "A Ndembu Doctor in Practice," and Claude Lévi-Strauss's "The Effectiveness of Symbols."

African Teeth

Seemingly at odds with the totalizing force of British Social Anthropology's reification of structure, one of Turner's gifts to anthropology was to make the wandering incisor tooth of a dead hunter the container of social structure and social history. It is the healer's task to divine the presence and then magically extract the angered ancestor's tooth from where it has lodged in a sick man's body, and the healer does this to the beat of drums and the stop-start rhythm of communal singing and individual confession on the part of the sick man's fellow villagers. Thus the healer, in Turner's account, uses ritual to

create a dramatic narrative tension and catharsis so as to close a wounding breach in the social body and hence reproduce the traditional social structure — in a truly stunning display of what Brecht would have called Aristotelian (dramatic) theater, as opposed to the epic form of tragedy he was developing as a revolutionary communist artist to heal the wounding breach in twentieth century capitalist social structure. Much later Turner (1982: 72) willingly acknowledged that his conceptualization of social drama was indeed based on Aristotle's notion of tragedy as bound to narrative form. For Brecht, of course, healing of the breach in the social body of capitalism meant de-narrativizing the logosphere, not restoring the deviation to the norm, nor chaos to structure, but estranging the normal through what Roland Barthes (1986: 214) describes as a technique akin to but better than semiology — namely *Seismology* or the production of shock.

What that seismology aimed at, in Brecht's words, was "showing showing" — disarticulating the signifier from the signified, the reality of the illusion from the illusion of reality, the representing from the represented. Thus seismology is not only the opposite of the magic as described by Turner for the Ndembu doctor's healing of the social body, it is also a technique which invites us to question the politics of representation in that Ndembu essay itself, wherein the subject addressed and the addressing of the subject become one.

The narrative tension created by the stop-start rhythm of the ritual, as represented, pervades the very texture of the author's representation — the poetics of the essay's culminating moment — which reproduces in its argument and in its very form the catharsis described as occurring amongst this group of beleaguered Ndembu villagers. While the villagers, eventually, through much Sturm und Drang, locate their aggrieved ancestor's tooth and therewith purify the village, we readers piggy-back on the same magical ritual to find, not the tooth, but the purity of structure, the real reality of the imaginary integrated whole.

The point is not whether this wonderful essay is right or wrong according to certain Positivist criteria, but to ask how it subliminally operates on us as a ritual of truth-making shaping our feeling and intuitive as well as highly conscious understandings concerning the security of the referent, of the character of the relationship between signs and their referents. Locating the vengeful and elusive tooth of the hunter becomes in effect a figure for an even more serious realization of ghostly emanations; namely, what we might call the ossification, or validation, of the construct "structure," found through the magical ministrations of the wise old healer (found and brought to the village by the anthropologist, be it noted) who bears an uncanny resemblance to the anthropologist from Manchester assiduously practising the craft of case-study social anthropology. Here ritual functions not merely to heal a breach in the (African) social body. It also serves, in using that very force — Africa," sickness, magical ritual — to mould us into the narrative power of the Nervous System's system, not just into a particular narrative discovered in a dislocated African village, but into the power of narration to represent the real.

Durkheimian Plastic

Another way of looking at this is to consider the symbol (or sign). In Turner's rituals the self is seen as Durkheimian plastic, zombied out in the liminal period to have, as wax impressed by a seal, the society's dominant symbols imposed into its inner being. This, of course, takes us into the heartland of German Romantic theory of the Symbol, a tradition which Walter Benjamin, in his study of allegory, drew upon and worked against. In that tradition allegory was contrasted invidiously with symbol: e.g. Goethe,

There is a great difference between a poet's seeking the particular from the general and his seeing the general in the particular. The former gives rise to allegory, where the particular serves only as an instance or example of the general; the latter, however, is the true nature of poetry: the expression of the particular without any thought of, or reference to, the general. Whoever grasps the particular in all its vitality also grasps the general, without being aware of it, or only becoming aware of it at a later stage.

(cited in Benjamin, 1977: 161)

For F. Creuzer the symbol could be defined (against the allegorical) in terms of the momentary, the total, the inscrutability of its origin, and the necessary. With regards to the first property Creuzer made (what Benjamin finds to be an excellent point) the observation that "that stirring and occasionally startling quality is connected to another, that of brevity. It is like the sudden appearance of a ghost, or a flash of lightning which suddenly illuminates the dark night. It is a force which seizes hold of our entire being" (Benjamin, op. cit.: 163).

As against that totalizing force of the mystical instant "which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded interior" (ibid, 165), in allegory the signifier is held apart from "its" signified by "a jagged line of demarcation" which is both death and history. Allegory disrupts the mystical fusion that constitutes the Symbol, and just as it can be used to rail against the Saussurian fusion constitutive of the Sign (signifier/signified), so it maintains that strategic gap of meaning in which, unlike the Symbol, there can be no redemption with nature passing transcendently into (a higher) meaning. And into that gap floods history, no less meaningful than it is meaningless, no less chaotic than it is ordered, no less systematic than it is nervous.

The Modern Sign & the Arbitrariness of Power

It is a sign of all reification...that the things can be named arbitrarily.

(T. W. Adorno, GS, 1: 367)

"To read what was never written." Such reading is the most ancient: reading before all languages, from the entrails, the stars, or dances. Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came into use. It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, which was once the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language. In this way language may be seen as the highest form of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity. . . .

(Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections*, 1978: 336)

Whereas Benjamin modernized the allegorical mode of the Baroque (coming, in the late 1920s, to refashion allegory in the notion of the dialectical image, via Marx's celebrated notion of commodity fetishism), Saussure, the father of modern semiotics, can be seen as modernizing the Symbol, taking it from the Romantics, cleansing it of its dubious humanist effulgences, locating it in a tradition of arbitrariness of linguistic conventions that stretched back at least to the eighteenth century, if not to Hobbes as well.² Sure the Sign was Arbitrary — but that served only to further enforce the system, ensuring just that final

solution of totalizing closure that the mystical fusion of the Symbol had been entrusted with. Saussure's operation here reminds me of Kafka, but in a back-handed sort of way, because of the way it so politically intertwines arbitrariness with meaning to the benefit of power. It is Kafka but without the shock effect and without the slightest sense of critique. It is the voice of the modern state apparatus, the voice of the modern corporation, the quintessence of that everyday but nevertheless still estranging phrase "The Arbitrariness of Power" — both systemic and arbitrary, in short the NS in one of its many guises.

The Swiss Connection

The dadaist puts more trust in the honesty of events than in the wit of people. He can get people cheaply, himself included. He no longer believes in the comprehension of things from *one* point of view, and yet he is still so convinced of the unity of all beings, of the totality of all things, that he suffers from the dissonances to the point of self-disintegration.

(Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time*)

Half way into the Great War, in 1916, the year in which Saussure's lectures were posthumously published in Geneva, a radically different approach to the famous "Arbitrariness of the Sign" was undertaken — at Zurich, with what came to be called dada. Here the sign's very arbitrariness provided the slippery terrain on which politics and history were acted — not acted out, as in Ndembu ritual, but acted on, by means of what we have come to understand as modern Performance in a zone we can now, looking back, define roughly by the coordinates of Artaud and Brecht. Arbitrariness was used to contest the arbitrariness of the sign that went into the systematizing of system. Reality was seen as swiss cheese. The nervousness of the NS was used against itself. Signifiers were dismantled, language became sound, and all around lay the petrified primordial landscape of the Great War.

Birds in Cages

We were like birds in cages surrounded by lions, wrote Hugo Ball who, together with his life-long companion Emmy Hennings, began the dada show at the Cabaret Voltaire. The cannons could be heard not far from Zurich as the War thundered on. Lenin lived a few blocks away at the time, but is not recorded as having attended dada evenings.

Emmy Hennings

John Elderfield writes that when Ball met her she was an itinerant actress and a night-club performer with "a highly unorthodox background" (1974: xvii). He says she had traveled in Russia and Hungary, had a broken marriage, suffered a time in prison, and was a suspected murderer. She was the one who got the job, singing, at what came to be called the Cabaret Voltaire, and persuaded the owner to take Ball along too as the piano player. But she is not accorded any importance in the origin or development of dada which is basically an all-male movement. But she was certainly one of the very few women involved with dada. There is an entry in Ball's memoir, for 1916, of what appears to be a notice from a Zurich newspaper, the *Zuricher Post*.

The star of the cabaret, however, is Mrs Emmy Hennings. Star of many nights of cabarets and poems. Years ago she stood by the rustling yellow curtain of a Berlin cabaret, hands on hips, as exuberant as a flowering shrub; today too she presents the same bold front and performs the same songs with a body that has since then been only slightly ravaged by grief.

(Ball, 1974: 63)

Hans Arp has left us a memorable description of dada nights at the cabaret. Only five performers are mentioned. Emmy Hennings is one of them.

Total Pandemonium. The people around us are shouting, laughing, and gesticulating. Our replies are sighs of love, volleys of hiccups, poems, moos, and miaowing of medieval *Bruitists*. Tzara is wiggling his behind like the belly of an Oriental dancer. Janco is playing an invisible violin and bowing and scraping. Madame Hennings, with a Madonna face, is doing the splits. Huelsenbeck is banging away nonstop on the great drum, with Ball accompanying him on the piano, pale as a chalky ghost.

(Elderfield, 1974: xxiii, quoting Arp)

We will come back to this image of the Madonna doing the splits, especially in relation to the dada man as ghost. She is a particularly interesting image in that as Emmy Hennings she is to be later accused of straightening out Ball's image after his death in 1927, characterizing dada as little more than a youthful excess on his path to righteousness and Catholic conversion, that fine old story about the inevitable movement from chaos to order (Elderfield: xliii- xliv). And in her own memoir, Hennings herself invoked the Madonna as Ball's origin, and destiny.

According to a letter written by Hans Richter, Emmy Hennings died in a small room above a grocery store in Magliaso (Tesson) in 1949. She must have been at least in her late fifties, and to survive was working day shifts in a factory (Motherwell, 1981: xxvi).

Flight Out of Time

In the memoir *Flight Out of Time*, drawn from his diaries for the years 1910-21 and published in 1927, the year of his death from stomach cancer at the age of forty one, Ball conveys the sense that dada for him is not simply the mere negative of the established order, but the attempt to make a mobile position that is resonant with the mobility of the Nervous System itself. On Huelsenbeck's poetry, for instance, he writes (in 1916) that it is

an attempt to capture in a clear melody the totality of this unutterable age, with all its cracks and fissures, with all its wicked and lunatic genialities, with all its noise and hollow din. The Gorgon's head of a boundless terror smiles out of the fantastic destruction (1974:56).

Not merely a formal problem of totality and fragmentation, but the destructive terror of this literally unutterable age. In this problematic is indicated the response. "What we are celebrating," Ball writes, "is both buffoonery and a requiem mass;" deceit is met with masks; social conventions are met with enthusiasm for illusions, and primitivism holds out powerful tools, especially that of magic. "The dadaist loves the extraordinary and the absurd," he writes,

He knows that life asserts itself in contradiction, and that his age aims at the destruction of generosity as no other age has ever done before. He therefore welcomes any kind of mask. Any game of hide-and-seek, with its inherent power to deceive. In the midst of the enormous unnaturalness, the direct and the primitive seem incredible to him (ibid: 65).

Preoccupied with poetry and the voice, Ball experimented with sound along the lines of Wasilly Kandinsky's abstract expressionist painting. "The image of the human form," he wrote, is gradually disappearing from the painting of these times and all objects appear only as fragments. This is one more proof of how ugly and worn the human countenance has become The next step is for poetry to decide to do away with language for similar reasons. These are things that have probably never happened before. (ibid: 55).

The Magical Bishop: Into the Abyss

Three months later (according to how he presents himself in his memoir) Ball is writing that "we have now driven the plasticity of the word to the point where it can scarcely be equaled. We achieved this at the expense of the rational, logically constructed sentence . . ." (ibid: 67). And five days later he attempted his great experiment with language, performing his sound poem *Karawane* with his legs and waist immobilized in a blue cardboard cylinder (an obelisk is how he referred to it), his arms and upper body sustaining a cape of wings, and on his head a large conical "witch doctor's" hat. He had to be carried onto the stage where he had set three music stands for his manuscript. As he progressed with his recitation,

gadji beri bimba

glandridi lauli lonni cadori

gadjama bim beri glassala

he found himself in trouble, unable to go on. Then the performance was taken over, his voice being transformed into what he later described as "the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West" (ibid: 71).

He had wanted to break open words and meaning, analogous to what had been done to the human figure by painters and by the world around us. He had begun his recitation by renouncing the corruption of the word and of writing by modern society. He had begun saying that to do this we had to "return to the innermost alchemy of the word," and he had ended in the order of Catholic liturgy. He writes that he does not know what gave him the idea of this liturgical singing but that,

for a moment it seemed as if there were a pale, bewildered face in my cubist mask, that half-frightened, half-curious face of a ten year old boy, trembling and hanging avidly on the priest's words in the requiems and high masses in his home parish. Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and I was carried down off the stage like a magical bishop" (ibid: 71).

The translation in Motherwell's edition reads, "I was carried, moist with perspiration, like a magical bishop, into the abyss" (1981: xxv-xxvi). John Elderfield claims that the recitation was privately planned by Ball as his final performance, but despite the planning it "not only alarmed the audience but also so unnerved Ball himself that he had to be carried off the stage when the performance ended" (1974: xxv). Dadaism was at once the climax of Ball's commitment to an activist aesthetic, notes Elderfield, "and the point beyond which he dared not move." This event is commonly portrayed not only as the climax of Ball's dadaism, but his rejection of it as well.

The steps subsequent to Ball's fall into the abyss, however, were not without significant ambiguity. For while he spent the next three years severing himself from the Zurich dadaists, partly in exile in the countryside, he was also striking out into the world of politics as a radical journalist on *Die Freie Zeitung*, in Bern, as well as becoming absorbed into mysticism which was, after 1920 and his and Emmy Henning's disappointment with German revolutionary movements, to claim him so firmly.

It is hard to resist a particular mythification of Hugo Ball's Magical Bishop, in part because it has become an icon of dada, and in part because of the drama so easily read into that truer than life performance of the hero struggling to transcend the disordered order of his time, taking disorder to its limit in a new type of dramatic art, only to break under the strain and, at the mercy of forces beyond his control, find himself sutured into the rhythmic order of the Church. In destroying the word, he was brought back to the Word. Was Ball perhaps too serious, too religious, and too political to transformatively enact the political implications of the arbitrariness of the sign? But might not it have been the case that just this degree of seriousness was what was required for dada's playfulness and purposeful lack of purpose?

Because he provokes these questions, Ball is for me the most interesting of all the dadaists. He establishes an agenda for our post-dada and postmodern age with which to reconsider the social and indeed political history of the sign and its relation to primitivism where the word and the Word stand in such marvelous tension as in his sound poem performances. To appreciate the stakes involved we need now to turn from his flight out of time to the pervasive aura in our time of shamanic flight and its implications for the narrative ordering of time.

Shamanic Flight: The Magic of Narrative

The celestial ascent [appears] to be a primordial phenomenon, that is, it belongs to man as such, not to man as a historical being; witness the dreams, hallucinations, and images of ascent to be found everywhere in the world, apart from any historical or other "conditions." All these dreams, myths, and nostalgias with a central theme of ascent or flight cannot be exhausted by a psychological explanation; there is always a kernel that remains refractory to explanation, and this indefinable, irreducible element perhaps reveals the real situation of man in the cosmos, a situation that, we shall never tire of repeating, is not solely "historical."

(Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 1964: xv)

If later, in regard to the traditional philosophical texts, I not so much let myself be impressed by their unity and systematic coherence as I concerned myself with the play of opposing and conflicting forces which goes on under the surface of every self-contained theoretical position, [it was certainly Siegfried Kracauer who showed me] how the most eloquent parts of the work are the wounds which the conflict in the theory leave behind.

(T. W. Adorno, "Der wunderliche Realist: Uber Siegfried Kracauer," (cited in Buck-Morss, 1977:80))

Mircea Eliade's classic, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, epitomizes the way anthropology and the sociology of religion created the "shaman" as an Object of Study — first a real "type" to be found in the wilderness of Siberia (among the Tungus), now everywhere from New York City to Ethnopoetics. Crucial to what I take here to be a potentially fascistic portrayal of third world healing is the trope of magical flight to the Other World, from life to death to transcendent rebirth, across the bridge or through the perilous way by means of "archaic techniques of ecstasy," generally and mightily mysteriously male. Here we encounter, in one of its more potent manifestations, not only the mystifying of Otherness as a transcendent force, but the reciprocal dependence on narrative which that mysterious stress on the mysterious entails.

But if we try to scrutinize the evidence — taking into account how extraordinarily slippery such evidence must be — concerning the narrative character of these magnificent and perilous flights, several cautions emerge, suggesting that the narrative form (one step bound to the following, beginning, middle, cathartic end) is the exception, not the rule, and that it is a certain sort of anthropology and social science, geared to particular notions of the primitive, of story-telling, of boundaries, coherence, and heroism, that has thus converted the exception into a fictitious rule.

I think that the evidence suggests instead a type of modernism in which parts are only loosely connected one to the other, there is no centralizing cathartic force, and there exists an array of distancing techniques involving and disinvolving the reader or spectator and thus, potentially at least, dismantling all fixed and fixing notions of identity. If we search for a reference point in Western history, Benjamin's commentary on Brecht's epic theater springs to mind (certainly with regards to my own experiences with "shamanism" in Latin America) because it suggests ways by which this "modernism" has a long, if underground and repressed genealogy:

Often in conflict with its theoreticians, such drama has deviated time and again, always in new ways, from the authentic form of tragedy — that is from Greek [Aristotelian] tragedy. This important but badly marked road (which may serve here as the image of a tradition) ran, in the Middle Ages, via Hroswitha and the Mysteries; in the age of the baroque, via Gryphius and Calderón. Later we find it in Lenz and Grabbe, and finally in Strindberg. Shakespearian scenes stand as monuments at its edge, and Goethe crossed it in the second part of *Faust*. It is a European road, but it is a German one too. If, that is, one can speak of a road rather than a stalking path along which the legacy of medieval and baroque drama has crept down to us.

(Benjamin, 1983b: 17-18)

What is also at issue here is the degree of certainty attached to the "shamanic" experience, a point poignantly made by Roger Dunsmore in his extraordinary commentary on the famous visions of the Oglala Sioux, Black Elk, but which never seems to be made by professional anthropologists or folklorists. In Black Elk's words (as we know them after being translated by his son Ben into English, then re-presented by John Neihardt from the transcription made by his daughter, Enid Neihardt).

As I lay thinking of my vision, I could see it all again and feel the meaning with a part of me like a strange power floating over in my body: but when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would be like a fog and get away from me. . . . It was as I grew older that the meanings came clearer and clearer out of the pictures and the words; and even now I know that more was shown me than I can tell.

(Dunsmore, 1977: 9)

"If we take him as a sort of paradigm," writes Dunsmore,

of what it means to be a man of vision, he *overturns our expectation* that the holy man arrives somewhere at the Truth, which is recognizable to him and to us. Instead Black Elk is deeply involved in *not knowing*, and in the *risk* that when he gives his vision away it will be ignored, misunderstood, or misused (ibid: 8).

It is to that *not knowing*, and to that *risk*, that we must, I feel, refer shamanic discourse — very much including the great trope of flight out of body, out of time. And if we but pause a moment, to let sink in the significance of the depth of the colonial relationship involved in the risk of giving the vision away, we then begin to realize what is incumbent upon us who receive the vision as members of a colonial institution — Anthropology, Comparative Religion, or whatever names and ciphers are here relevant. "What becomes clear through his life story," notes Dunsmore, "is that a great vision is only a beginning, a starting place or point of departure, not an end, not final." What we do with that radical uncertainty is the measure not only of our ability to resist the appeal for closure, but also of our ability to prise open history's closure with the lever of its utterly terrible incompleteness. After the massacre at Wounded Knee,

And so it was all over.

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

(Black Elk, through John Neihardt, 1979: 270)

It is to this very incompleteness that our redemptive reading of the shamanic flight should be directed. This entails a different notion of the relationship between history and narrative. "The concept of progress should be based on the idea of catastrophe," wrote Walter Benjamin. "That things 'just keep on going' is the catastrophe. It isn't that which lies ahead, but that which always is given" (1983a: 21). What we will find, Benjamin

seems to me to be saying, is that no matter how narrativized and progress-oriented history is portrayed, the reality is that there is always a point in relation to our own circumstances in history where the steps in the story crack open. Remember Barthes' "seismology"? That was the anarchist-semiotician's way of trying to ride this tiger, hanging onto Brecht, while Benjamin is in this instance expressing the same notion in a mystical language that encompasses both narrative and montage, on the one hand, and History and its depiction, on the other. He wants us to be alert for that instant in narrative's smooth con when, for a brief instant, a chance is given when the Messiah may come, a tense and perfectly still of reality and the politics thereof. He exhorts us to take cognizance of the Messianic cessation of happening as the springboard of radical procedure, "in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history — blasting specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework" (1969: 263). This is redemption in a vastly different key to that of narrative flow (with or without catharsis) which we find underwriting our dominant forms for representing both History and Shamanism: Like the Nervous System, this seismological method of Benjamin's and the hope it contains is based on the notion that History forms no structural whole but is made to appear as if it does, and as such is empowered. It is in this sense that Benjamin saw his destructive/constructive method as one of brushing history against the grain.

Retracing the History of the World: The Magic of Origins and its Healing Power

I am arguing that shamanism is crucially a made-up, modern, Western category, an artful reification of disparate practices, snatches of folklore and overarching folklorizations, residues of long-established myths intermingled with the politics of academic departments, curricula, conferences, journal juries and articles, funding agencies, and so forth, such that shamanism is seen not as our creation but real in a quite different sense, as existing outside of our representations of it in, for instance, that truly wondrous and orgiastically cosmic location of the Originary. Later, with Claude Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of a Cuna birthing song, we will be brought into the womb and the Originary as Other, in constellation with the vagina as the sacred flightpath for shamanic intercourse with the Birth of Tragedy. This raises the ways by which Woman is made — in this artful reification that is shamanism — into the Originary Other as a quintessence of Primitivism, so as to reproduce the Universal Subject.

For catharsis lies not only with narrative closure, but with the return to origin, for which there is no better Western model than Dante's *Divine Comedy* wherein the pre-eminently Christian Poet recruits the pagan Virgil as his shamanic guide from the dark woods of confusion down into the circles of hell where the awesome confrontation with the spirit of evil takes place. It is this direct confrontation (not merely with evil, but with the founding of Rome, through Virgil) which sets the preconditions for the finding of the self, but the definitive suturing of the subject-position only occurs in the encounter with woman (as gateway to His Grace), in the transcendent figure of Beatrice, thus fetishizing one of the truly great cultural codings of Western culture: loss of self, primitive guide, shamanic flight, hell, woman, finding of self and transcendence. It is to this sequence, conflating as a magical force the Primitive and Woman, that I now wish to turn, to examine the post-medieval magical landscape of the third world where time and space become united in a geography through which, as through the sacred flight path, the Westerner undertakes the great Odyssey of Self-Making again and again.

Nowhere is this clearer for me than in Alejo Carpentier's novel, *Los pasos perdidos* (The Lost Steps), written in the mid-twentieth century. This work is all the more fascinating in that Carpentier, a Cuban, and his own sort of Marxist, had self-consciously broken with the avant garde of the first world to give voice to what he took to be a more authentic and richer expression, in the popular culture of his third world, of what that first world's avant garde, in Surrealism, was trying to achieve. With the advantage of hindsight it is now all too easy to claim that in fact he was carrying out a Western European avant garde project and perceiving the popular culture of the third world with exactly the same primitivistic optic that Surrealism itself stimulated. (I say all too easy because it is exceedingly difficult, perhaps impossible, to evade this defining power of the Center.) It was to what he called *lo real maravilloso* that Carpentier was drawn, to the everyday magical quality of lived experience he detected as powerful in times past and present in islands such as Cuba and Haiti, and in Venezuela in whose wooded interior the Lost Steps are traced.

Alienated from modern civilization, the protagonist undertakes a type of magical flight from Europe to the interior of Latin America. Traveling from city to town, from town to hamlet, from hamlet to the forest, he is also passing back in time, into (European) history. At the end of his journey, deep in the forest with a peasant woman, fecund and compliant, he finds the beginning of human history, constituted as a fragile and ultimately illusory wholeness in the figure of a male Indian shaman vainly attempting to bring to life, through magical song, a hunter who has been dead for several hours.

As he approaches the Origrinary which shamanism establishes with the power of Woman, he notes that,

We were intruders, ignorant outlanders — late arrivals — in a city born in the dawn of History. If the fire the women were now fanning was suddenly to go out, we would be unable to rekindle it if we had to depend on our own unskilled hand

(Carpentier, 1975: 179)

There is this terrible fear that life, for which we can also read Self, will disappear if woman is unable to fan the fire at the dawn of history. As for his newly found companion, Rosario, she erotically combines movement with centering.

It did not matter to her where we went, nor whether the lands we visited were near or remote. For Rosario the idea of being far away from some famous place where life could be lived to the full did not exist. The center of the universe for her, who had crossed frontiers without a change of language, who had never dreamed of the ocean, was where the sun shone at midday overhead. She was a woman of the earth, and as long as she walked the earth, and ate, and was well, and there was a man to serve as mold and measure, with the compensation of what she called "the body's pleasure," she was fulfilling a destiny that it was better not to analyse too much, for it was governed by "big things" whose workings were obscure and, besides, were beyond man's understanding (ibid: 180).

Finally, deep in the forest, he meets up with Indians — whom he sees as "human larvae, from whose loins hung virile members, like my own." It is the sight of the men's sexual organs that creates in the protagonist a feeling of common identity, ensuring the narrative's questing thrust in a spate of dizziness and regression. But as signifier of union, this "virile member" is deeply ambiguous. It is far from sure that, primitive as it is, it can

really connect civilized man with his Indian counterpart. Instead it seems to trigger off a staggering of subject positions — in which the striving for completeness must, finally, locate its most othered Other, the pre-Oedipal phallic mother. Midst the reed hammocks

where they lay and fornicated and procreated, there was a clay object baked in the sun, a kind of jar without handles, with two holes opposite each other in the upper part, and a navel outlined in the convex surface by the pressure of a finger when the clay was still soft.

This was God. More than God it was the Mother of God. It was the Mother, primordial in all religions. The female principal, genesial, womb, to be found in the secret prologue of all theogonies. The Mother, with swollen belly, which was at one and the same time breasts, womb, and sex, the first figure modeled by man, when under his hands the possibility of the object came into being The Mother, "lonely, beyond space and even time, whose sole name, Mother, Faust twice uttered with terror (ibid: 183).

Midst the reed hammocks, where the Indians lie fornicating, this sun-baked belly-dimpled earthen pot empties out the heavy atmospherics of Eliade's "celestial ascent" that "belongs to man as such." His "archaic techniques of ecstasy" and Jerome Rothenberg's "technicians of the sacred" (a figure taken from Eliade), are indeed revelatory (as Eliade claims) of "the real situation of man in the cosmos" — in which the flight to the shaman, no less than the flight of the shaman is, for us, a home run to mom (not to mention to that "dimple" in her tum). It is here, also, that discourse itself is born. For following the Mother what the hero now sees is a shaman trying to snatch a still warm corpse from the jaws of death. The shaman is shaking his pebble-filled gourd rattle over the body and as he does so, he sings — or rather, voices come out of him. It is here, then, that the Mother/divine vessel gives birth to the shaman's song in the primal enactment of the phallogocentric order, and of its dissolution as well.

"And in the vast jungle filling with night terrors," continues the narrator of *lo real maravilloso*, "there arose the Word. A word that was more than word." A word that imitates both the voice of the speaker and that of the spirit of the dead man. They alternate. They harangue each other; one from the throat of the shaman, the other from his belly. Trills, panting, guttural portamenti ending in howls, the hint of a rhythm every now and again, the vibration of the tongue, "the panting contrapuntal to the rattle of the gourd. This was something far beyond language, and yet still far from song. Something that had not yet discovered vocalization, but was more than word" (ibid: 184). We pay homage to Hugo Ball.

The shamanic flight ceases at this point, poised between sound and word where narrativity begins (but, of course, the melody lingers on . . .). The dead man cannot be restored to life. The Word grows faint. And if we go back further in time we will encounter the loneliness of the Creator "when the earth was without order and empty and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (ibid: 187).

It is from the terror of this lonely dark disorder that shamanism — as a Western discourse — was born, reproducing the very idea of narrativity itself.

The Home of Dreams

Reading reading. This is how Roland Barthes would have us understand Brecht's "seismology." Such a strange conflation, one is tempted to say, of force and intellect, the physicality of shock, as in seismology, the refinement of interpreting interpretation, as in reading reading. We remember the donkey on Brecht's desk with the sign around its neck saying "Even I must understand," and we see Roland Barthes reading Brecht and finding a world of signifiers suddenly pulled from under him, the trick being not the exposure of the real but showing how the real has the effects claimed for it. Hence showing showing — in effect teaching — and we who no longer visit the home of dreams, as Brecht called the realism-theater, have still to reckon with the reality-effects claimed for that other "home of dreams," namely the hands-on field-experience of the ethnographer. This reckoning cannot be achieved by more visitations to the home of dreams so long as we do not analyse the dream-work itself, in an infinitely more reflective anthropological sense of anthropology itself as ethnographic artifact — of how ethnography and ethnology create reality. Hence in reading ethnography and social analyses of primitive people, of African teeth and shamanic chants, for instance, we do not ask in a friendly or skeptical way, "What is *the reality behind this text?*" or, "What are the natives really up to?" We do not challenge the alleged facts per se. We leave that to the *American Ethnologist*. Instead we ask about *the reality effected by that text*, about the creation through such a text of a reader, and hence, in an age where we can no longer comfortably posit a compleat person, a noble Subject, we ask what sort of First World Subject-positioning does this or that anthropological text create?

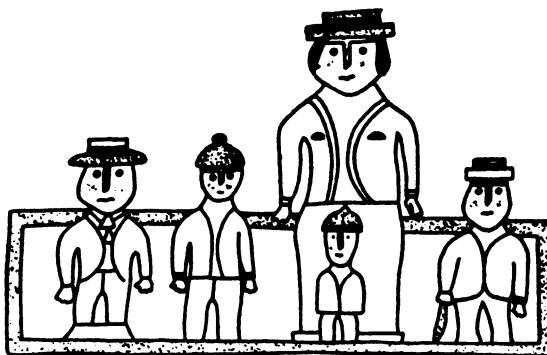
Thus stretches the necessary yet exciting task before us, practising seismology on the artfully textualized entanglements of getting us right through getting the natives right, to see our seeing, to show our showing — so as to begin the long overdue Study of Man through his anthropological endeavor to (w)rite the primitive.

Soul-Loss: Vaginal Odyssey

In the San Blas islands off Panama and Colombia a woman lies heaving in labor. She falls unconscious. She has lost her *purba*, "essence" or "soul."³ The midwife rushes for the male shaman. Cocoa beans are burnt under the sick woman's hammock, strengthening the clothes of the shaman (who wears a clean white shirt and a tie) in the presence of his male spirit helpers (and their women?), giving him the courage to face Muu, the female spirit personification of the uterus, who is not only the creator of the fetus, but is responsible for abducting the laboring woman's soul.

Thus, for what continues for some 24 printed pages, (first published in 1947 by the Swedish ethnographers, Nils Holmer and Henry Wassén), begins the shaman's song aimed at recapturing the woman's soul from Muu — who is also (according to Erland Nordenskiöld (1938: 442)), "in some measure" the same person as "the original mother" from whose womb all being becomes. It is even more mind-blowing to learn (once again, from Nordenskiöld (1938: 372-73) that Muu lives in the magnificent city of the dead. Together with seven other women she rules over this city, recycling the dead into fetuses. Once again the Great Goddess beckons as the telos of shamanic flight. Only here that flight is not only explicitly male, but is cast by Holmer and Wassén (and later, Lévi-Strauss), as the movement of the penis along the vagina.

The shaman prepares his *nuchus*, wooden dolls, underneath the woman's hammock. These male figures are his spirit helpers who will undertake the vaginal odyssey and they all, writes Nordenskiöld (1938: 345), represent European types from the 18th and possibly the 17th centuries. Crucial to their power is the magical wood from which they are carved — and we know from the introduction to the account of another Cuna shaman's song, *Nia-Ikala* (for the curing of madness), that these magical woods, such as balsa, derive from the womb of the original mother, herself said to be born from the uterus of an ambiguously "male" god whom Nordenskiöld suggests is the patriarchal figure laid over the Cuna Mother by European conquest in the 16th century. The connection with the European power is quite explicit in the carving of the spirit helpers. The shaman sings, "In order to see that it is good I carve out your bodies, I cut out your bodies with a sharp little knife from the uncles" (line 145). By uncles is here meant the white man (according to Holmer and Wassén). It is these cut-outs in male European garb who stand for those who will penetrate the laboring Indian woman and crush Muu, forcing her to relinquish the woman's soul and stay in her right place. Thus in the battle for the laboring woman's soul might even suggest, amongst other things, the enactment of the ascension of colonial patriarchy.



The Gaze: Single File

The scopic drive, seeing, and not being seen seeing, is emphasized at many points in Holmer and Wassén's rendering of the shaman's song.

The Chief of the carved wooden figures waits to ask the woman about her life-soul.

(He asks) "Where is your eyesight straying? Where is it asleep?"

(The woman answers) "My eyesight is straying, it is asleep on Mu Puklip's path."

"It is Mu Puklip who has come to me. She wants to take my nigapurbalele [life-soul] for good" (lines 95-100).

The spirit helpers are readied, their hats shine white, they assume a flattened and leveled shape "all straight and smooth." They become terrifying "for the sake of the woman's life-soul" which they are going to bring back under the hammock and restore to the woman. The shaman encourages his spirit-helpers, telling them he has never let a man lose a single mouth to Muu, and that "I shall never let a man lose a single eye" (line 160).

As for Muu, however, she is threatened with losing her mouth, her throat, and her eyes. Moreover, her stick will be broken and she will be forced to drop it (lines 161-164). The male shaman puts human souls into his dolls and tells them,

"As for Muu Puklip's stronghold, it is not difficult to see at once; since you are invisible, you are becoming shamans, you will perform things by seeing" (line 235).

The spirit-helpers put good sight/light to see in the dark/eyes/mirrors into the sick woman, the spirit-helpers light good eyes in the sick woman (line 238).

The spirit-helpers go balancing up on top of the hammock [meaning the vulva], they go moving upwards (in single file) like the penis (line 239).

Rows of Four: Inside or Outside?

According to Holmer and Wassén (1953: 102) this vagina is "an extremely dangerous place in the imagination of the Indians," as can be seen "from the great number of horrifying [male] animals by whom it is supposed to be inhabited, such as various alligators and the octopus, with its clutching tentacles." Now as "a host of men" the shaman's spirit helpers pour into Muu's gate. Forcing their way through, they overcrowd her house, cutting and tearing the threads that obstruct them. They are now no longer in single file but in rows of four with their hats rising, emitting smoke, challenging Muu's helpers, all female, to a tournament. Muu's house becomes stained with blood. She sits sprawled out on the floor, coughing from the smoke, and cries,

I have spoken to you in vain; you terrify my children. I have spoken to you in vain.

All bad shamans are coming to my castle, such as can see their (sick woman).

They stand seeing the stronghold of the spirits [Muu's abode], they have become seers (lines 394-97).

And she "forgets" the laboring woman's soul, which is now addressed by the shaman's spirit-helpers:

"Your body lies in front of you in the hammock" (line 430).

Now there is, then, this strange extraversion. Previously all the action appears to have been inside the woman's body. Now, suddenly, it's outside, just when the laboring woman's soul is being restored. Holmer and Wassén say here (1953: 107) that "The Indian trend of thought is neither always strictly logical nor consistent in a text of this kind." Yet they seem concerned by this apparent inconsistency. In the song lines immediately following, in which the shaman, likened to the penis, that is, to the action of the penis, wipes the inner place dry, they rather anxiously reaffirm the interior — the vaginal — location of the action in language that is a study in indeterminacy, combining the interrogative with the subjunctive moods. "The dessication . . . again indicates that the place in question is supposed to be located inside the woman" (ibid: 108).

I am emphasising this seemingly contradictory movement of embodiment and disembodiment because I believe it is better to "listen" to the song at precisely this point, engaging with the conflict of interpretations, and not disavowing them, either through shrugging them off or by straightening them out through structuralist machinery. It is precisely this instability, with regard to the female body as referent of the soul (read self), that clamors

for attention — if we begin to think of this song not only as a birthing song but also as a ritual re-enactment of the making of the male self, it being crucial to realize, of course, that by means of the Anthropological Project, this ritual involves us as spectator-participants as much as the Indians.⁴

Indeed, spectatorship (assuming the male optic) is crucial to this stabilizing and destabilizing of viewpoint. Just prior to the spirit-helpers putting the woman's soul(s) into her body, the song again stresses sight, here in a decidedly concentric / cuntcentric image; men emphasizing the body as vagina, the vagina as center, and the woman's soul itself taking on the character, so it might seem, of the male about to penetrate the woman sexually. The spirit-helpers say to her soul:

"She lies in the middle of her white garment,"
 "The white inner garment, is budding like a flower,"
 "Your woman lies beside you, her eyesight is confused."

Which Holmer and Wassén interpret to mean that along with the soul, the spirit-helpers have brought the woman's eyesight which was roaming.

Subsequently, almost as an after-thought, a baby is born.

The Effectiveness of Symbols

Faced with this penetration of the female body by males in a magical enactment not merely of vaginal intercourse but of a virtual rape (remember, we are "reading reading;" who knows what the violence, fantasy even humor (?), "means" to "the Indians"), it is instructive to read Claude Lévi-Strauss's celebrated interpretation of its (alleged) effectiveness as providing the laboring woman with a structure — a language — by means of which the disorder of her body can be made intelligible (to her, of course), hence orderly and therefore capable of giving birth (Lévi-Strauss, 1967).

In this interpretation (which completely ignores the performative, social, and historical contexts of the song-text), Lévi-Strauss emphasizes the "structural" transformation in the song from the shaman's spirit-helpers marching in the vagina in *single file* to their entering Muu's abode in *rows of four*. "No doubt, he writes (ibid: 196), "the purpose of such an alteration in the details of the myth is to elicit the corresponding organic reaction, but the sick woman could not integrate it as experience if it were not associated with a true increase in dilation." It is the effectiveness of symbols which guarantees such a combined development, the song providing the meaning, the patient performing the action.

Of course this not so much explains *as assumes* the efficacy of symbols. And in making such an assumption are we not subject as readers, male as well as female, to a meta-shamanic magical text cast in the form of an Anthropological (*structuraliste*) Explanation? Take this crucially important passage wherein the comparison with psychoanalysis is wrought:

It would be a matter, either way [psychoanalytic or shamanic], of stimulating an organic transformation which would consist essentially in a structural reorganization, by inducing the patient to live out a myth — either received or created by him [sic] — whose structure would be, at the unconscious level, analogous to the structure whose genesis is sought on the organic level. The effectiveness of symbols would consist precisely in this "inductive property," by which formally homologous structures, built out of different materials at different levels of life — organic processes, unconscious mind, rational thought — are related to one

another (ibid: 197).

Here the critical connection, upon which the entire weight of the essay rests, is established between myth and action — and it is doubtful if the language into which we are being sutured here could be more opaque, more mystifying . . . the language of "homologous structures" and "inductive properties." How quaintly this mysterious language sits with the strenuous claims advanced for the scientificity of structuralisme, the science of the system of the "arbitrariness of the sign."

In point of fact the shaman's song-text barely mentions single file/rows of four; the former once, the latter twice, in a text that spans 24 pages. Nor does the the song indicate in ways direct or metaphoric that this transition is a key feature in the dilation of the birth canal. Rather, rows of four is first mentioned when the forcible entry into Muu's abode occurs (line 388), and the second and final mention is made (line 428) at the same anatomical juncture, namely Muu's gate, now juxtaposed with the woman's "gate" when her soul is restored into her from outside her body and not, as Lévi-Strauss writes, simply when the spirit-helpers emerge from Muu's abode in some allegedly cathartic release cascading through "homologous structures." That line reads in a far more complex fashion; "The spirit helpers go out, the spirit helpers march in a row, they are going to enter by the woman's gate." Exit is conflated with entry, inside with outside, and leaving with restoration. It is an elusive and complicated action that is being presented, no less so than the body in question. Moreover, one cannot ignore that "rows of four" is here to do with forcible entry into the body, and not with "downwards" movement out of it "isomorphic" with the expulsion of the fetus.

Understanding Understanding and the Chaos of Woman

But maybe all this concern with the true and real meaning of the text is irrelevant anyway? For not only does it appear to crumble at our analytic touch, resisting interpretation that would reduce it to another sphere of reference such as the chaotic body or the straightened-out-body, but one has to bear with a considerable weight of hermeneutic doom because — and one can hardly over-emphasize this — we have to seriously question how much of the song the laboring woman actually understands? (And of course once one raises this doubt, it takes root. What, after all, is meant by "actually" understands?) All this on account of an observation by Holmer and Wassén that,

Like so many other species of literary composition of a magical or mystical nature, the song of *Mu-Igala* cannot be rightly understood except by the Indian medicine man himself or by those initiated by him (1953: 14).

Yet for Lévi-Strauss it is crucial that the woman herself understands. Everything depends upon this. "The shaman provides the sick woman with a *language*," he writes (with emphasis), "by means of which unexpressed and otherwise inexpressible psychic states can be immediately expressed." This language is what makes it possible for her

to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible — which induces the release of physiological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favorable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected (1967: 193).

In short, "Once the sick woman understands [the song]," he writes, " she gets well."

But not only are we now saddled with ineradicable doubts about what it is that the woman "understands," this woman for whom so many men are speaking, but we have also to question whether in fact she does "get well."⁵ The aim of the essay is in its title, "The Effectiveness of Symbols" (*L'Efficacité symbolique*). Yet what if the symbols are not effective? Surely their efficacy cannot be assumed but has to be demonstrated? Even more to the point, what is it that is being made efficacious? Is it the birthing of a real baby by what Lévi-Strauss calls organ-manipulation through symbols, or is it the process of subject-positioning through the male manipulation of the "lost" female soul?⁶ And in the latter eventuality are we not, in reading Lévi-Strauss's explanation as the great drama of birthing from chaos to order, being sutured, as female as well as male readers, into an almost sacred zone where gender positioning and the "culture of explanation" in the social sciences of man fuse — such that explanation amounts to a man midst magically empowering smoke singing unintelligible text into the birth canal of the world, forever chaotic and female, so as to reproduce "structure"?

Form and Content, Fixing and Slippage: Where is Elsewhere?

His [the Anthropologist's] goal is to grasp, beyond the conscious and always shifting images which men hold, the complete range of unconscious possibilities.

(Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction: History and Anthropology," *Structural Anthropology*, 1967: 23)

There can be no work on the image, no challenge to its powers of illusion and address, which does not simultaneously challenge the fact of sexual difference.

(Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision" (1986: 226))

In *The Language of The Self*, Anthony Wilden (1968: 259) cites Jacques Derrida (*Writing and Difference*) to the effect that Lévi-Strauss breaks with "structure" in the old western metaphysical sense as something with a center, resulting (according to Wilden) "in a sort of decentered and self-criticizing discourse." At one point Derrida writes of "the stated abandonment [in Lévi-Strauss] of all reference to a *center*, to a *subject*, to a privileged *reference*, to an origin or to an absolute *archia*." And in "The Effectiveness of Symbols" Lévi-Strauss reiterates that his method gives precedence to form over content, such that the unconscious is "always empty." Like the stomach in relation to the food it digests, so the unconscious is empty, "imposing structural laws upon inarticulated elements which originate elsewhere — such as impulses, emotions, representations and memories" (*ibid*: 199).

But one wants to ask where this "elsewhere" exists, and whether and in what sense Lévi-Strauss's "structure" is centerless. For what his interpretation of the Cuna song suggests is that if "form" has precedence, it is because "form" is an ideological smokescreen for a decisively important phallic "content" — an unacknowledged process of subject-formation in which "form" becomes metonymic with the universal (Male) subject — all of which raises, yet once again, how elusive is the whole project of decentering, given that the universal Subject is no less a fantasy than the essence it assumes. Anyway, so what if it's "centerless," given that this very characteristic is what enables it to both deceive and rigify — provided it has a center in which it can make itself whole!

It has been argued that Jacques Lacan, who apparently read Lévi-Strauss's "Effectiveness of Symbols" in 1949 (Wilden, 1968: 249), is indebted to the latter's linguistic conception of the unconscious as the organ of symbolic form (de Lauretis, 1986: 364). Yet it is surely Lacan (whom Catherine Clement (1983: 49-50), an avid participant in his seminar, on more than one occasion likens to a shaman!), who resists the compulsive fixing of meaning and centering of "structure" that draws Lévi-Strauss like a moth to a flame. In her essay, "Reading the Phallus," Jane Gallop (1985: 144) likewise resists, reminding us of a cardinal principle of Nervous System practice — that Lacan's language "itself, and not just his theory of language, includes a fixing and slippage. And that we need to read it in both ways."

The Signification of the Phallus

I am suggesting, in short, that a classic text of Structuralism provides, through its interpretive practice, the (re)staging of the event in which, for our reading reading, Man is, if not born/borne, then at least reconstituted as the Universal Subject — in a truly breathtaking performance of phallogocentrism. I am also suggesting that "fixing" of meaning, through Structuralism, for instance, is a decidedly political manipulation — a repression of the necessity to read the system resulting from the arbitrariness of the sign in ways that include both fixing and slippage. In other words, just as the structuralist interpretation here engages the reader into the male subject position, so that subject position is at home with structuralism as the fixing of meaning — and we will have occasion below to speculate what this homely feeling may involve. Before that we need to consider what would seem one of the most obvious facts or images in both the song and in Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of it; namely the phallus.

Let us go back to the song-lines quoted above concerned with the scopic drive. For Freud and especially for Lacan's reading of Freud, looking is by no means passive; it is always implicated in a system of control. It is in the circuit obtaining between the pleasure of the voyeur, positioning the other, and the exhibitionistic pleasure accruing to the object-position, that Lacan locates the pleasure of finding oneself as a unified whole, fending off lack and incoherence through an imagined and fetishized other. In our society, if not in that of the Cuna, this circuit of scopic pleasure, control, and subject-positioning is constituted within a gendered division of labor. It is women who are thus scoped. As in the Cuna shaman's song, He sees, but is not seen, and by this same conjuncture His sight is supernaturally empowered. It can change what it looks at, and one of the chief things it accomplishes is to give her sight — a way of seeing, we could say, an identification, if not an ideology. His is the scopic power of the voyeur that has available woman's body, especially her fabled incompleteness (castration), so as to imagine himself whole and self-coherent by sighting / site-ing her into that imagined wholeness. Jane Gallop (1982: 22) presents an interpretation of Lacanian theory that strikes me as relevant here.

The phallus is both the (dis)proportion between the sexes, and the (dis)proportion between any sexed being by virtue of being sexed (having parts, being partial) and human totality. So the man is 'castrated' by not being total, just as the woman is 'castrated' by not being a man. Whatever relation of lack man feels, lack of wholeness, lack in/of being, is projected onto woman's lack of phallus, lack of maleness. Woman is then the figuration of phallic 'lack'; she is a hole. By these mean and extreme phallic proportions, the whole is to man as man is to the hole.

Might not this "whole" turn out to be Muu, herself, as the phallic mother? Jane Gallop (ibid) tells us that this whole "in relation to which man is lacking, has its basis in what in Freudian terms is called the 'phallic mother'. The 'whole' is the pre-Oedipal mother, apparently omnipotent and omniscient, until the 'discovery of her castration'" (the battle with the hats, wherein she is defeated?).

But what I want to stress here are not symbolic correspondences — that sort of crude Freudian/Jungian application is very far from my intended practice. Nor do I wish merely to draw attention in my reading reading to the rather stupendous way the drama of woman's labor is being staged in order to enact the great phallogocentric drama. In addition I regard it as of the utmost importance to consider that the subject position therewith achieved is the prime material of the Nervous System.

Gallop, for example, notes that the woman (phallic mother) "is to the man what the man is to the (castrated) woman," such that men and women are not just unequal but they occupy the same position in different harmonic ratios, at different moments." The effect, she goes on to note, "is a staggering of position." Likewise, Kate Linkner (1984: 400-401) writes that it is to the phallic mother that man will return in fantasy,

through the displacement of desire along the metonymic chain, attempting to recuperate wholeness, to rediscover plenitude, to disavow his own necessary partiality through projection onto the feminine substitute. Lacan designates this object as *objet a*, in reference to *l'autre*, the Other, that point of certainty toward which subjectivity strains . . . woman is thus employed to comprise the stable, unified masculine subject in disavowal of its constitutive contingency.

It is with this "disavowal of its constitutive contingency" and to Gallop's "staggering of position" that the NS's nervousness belongs — nowhere more so, perhaps, than with the phallic mother herself.

Homesickness

What I am suggesting is that there is a dominant culture of explanation in academe empowered by a conflation of "shamanic" magic, the search for order, and the vaginal odyssey of the penis reproducing the (fiction of the) universal (hence male) Subject. Lévi-Strauss's essay is a striking manifestation of this practice, because here the method in an almost wilfully iconic manner fuses with its content, but it is far from being a unique instance of the culture I have here in mind, a culture of domination drawn ever towards the reproduction of that Subject via a familiar resting place, the "secretly familiar," that for Freud was designated by the uncanny where the phallic eye scoped out the mother's genitalia, returning — endlessly returning — to the womb. In what has now become a well-worn, even homely, quotation, Freud writes about the female genital organs:

This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that 'Love is home-sickness;' and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "this place is familiar to me, I've been here before," we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body (Standard Edition, Complete Works, XVII: 245).

And he adds, "In this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix *un* is the token of repression."

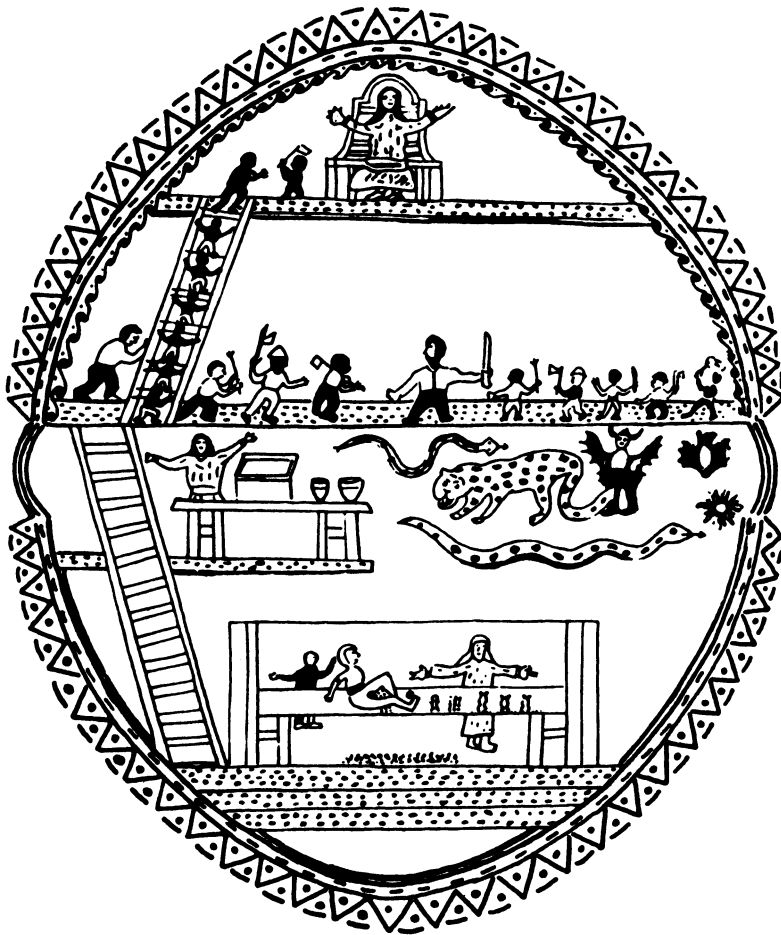
This return home, then, is far from straightforward, and what makes the explanation-game worth playing is the playing with repression, just as mythic narrative itself, as Teresa de Lauretis advises us (1982: 118-123), comprises a male hero finding his way through an enclosed space (hole, woman, womb) — starkly confirmed by Carpentier's protagonist in *The Lost Steps* taking us to the shamanic beginnings of language itself, where music, language, and healing concur just this side, our side, off from loneliness, disorder, and nothing. But of course *this* sort of playing with repression so as to strengthen disorder's order, merely strengthens its fixing powers. That's what the academe-game is so often about.

In the ethnography of Cuna medicine it is forcibly stated that for magical power the notion of returning home is crucially important, for it is from the birth canal of the original mother that the magically endowed woods, such as balsa, come into the world, providing the (almost inevitably male) shaman with the material from which he carves his *nuchus* or (male) spirit-helpers. This endows the Muu-Igala song for obstructed labor with added significance, especially when we take into account Nordenskiöld's suggestion (1938: 442) that Muu and the original cosmic mother are "in some measure the same person." He stresses the absolute necessity in Cuna magic for not only knowing origins, but of repeating and re-enacting them through song; that "in order for the medicine or medicine song to have effect, [the shaman] must know the origin of the plant, how it has been given birth by the first woman" (ibid: 344). And he reiterates that "In the spiritual world of the Cuna Indians these legends of the Creation play an immensely important part. Every medicine song must be preceded by an invocation announcing the origin of the medicine or else the incantation does not act" (ibid: 374).

In Nia-Ikala, the song to cure madness (recorded for Holmer and Wassén in 1953), the "secret" or origin-invocation of balsa wood portrays the great father as impregnating himself and giving birth to a girl and a boy. They grow up and, in what is the longest and most detailed part of the *secreto* invocation, the woman gives birth to the magically empowered woods, as depicted by the Cuna, Guillermo Hayans, in an unmistakably homely framework (as you can see opposite).

This great father equipped with the powers of self-insemination and a female reproductive system is possibly a result of European colonialism. Aware of the pitfalls confronting appeals to an unprovable, pre-colonial, *Mutterrecht*, Nordenskiöld (whose work amongst the Cuna dates from the early 1930s), nevertheless suggests that "the Cunans may originally have had a story of creation without God, without any fatherhood, in other words that the idea of the original mother is old but the original father is something later arrived at" (ibid: 443-44). And he is clearly impressed by the frequent accounts in which "these Indians imagine that everything has, in a natural manner, sprung from her womb without there being any mention of fatherhood" (ibid: 438).

This notion of a womb-sprung world is also to be found amongst the Kogi in northern Colombia (along the Caribbean coast from the Cuna) as related by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, whose work in this respect is referred to in several places in the Holmer and Wassén analysis of the Cuna birthing song. From Holmer and Wassén we learn that when a Kogi woman is having a complicated labor, the shaman sings a song directed to the "primordial mother." From Reichel-Dolmatoff's ethnography itself, we also learn that the Kogi world is conceived of as so many different manifestations of the womb — the men's ceremonial house being one such manifestation — and that in a beguiling inflection of the Oedipal complex, boys are frequently seduced at puberty by their mothers, continuing to have sexual intercourse with their mothers even after they have achieved adulthood and are



Copia de un dibujo hecho por Guillermo Hayans para ilustrar el "secreto" de *Nia-ikalu*.

From Holmer and Wassén, 1958

married. Indeed many Kogi men assured the ethnographer that only with one's mother could a man have a satisfying copulation. In the men's (there is no women's) ceremonial house, however, the young men are, before all else, warned of the great danger their mothers represent. Thus, after describing still more entailments of the Kogi world as a uterine universe, Reichel-Dolmatoff is able to conclude that, "Therefore it becomes comprehensible that the mother becomes the central figure in a religion whose great promise is the return of the individual to the womb" (1985, volume 2: 255).

Indeed his own discursive process of self-comprehension provides confirmation of how seductive this call of the womb can be. "At the beginning," he writes of his work, "when I slowly penetrated the Kogi world, I felt attracted by the exuberance of its images; it was a world made impressive by its coherence and organization." Surely here is testimony suggestive of a creative tension and fusion, in the constitution of the ethnographizing consciousness, as to the ways by which a male discourse utilizes Freud's "secretly familiar" in order to create "structure"? And the resemblances to Lévi-Strauss's interpretive-processing are obvious. The seduction does not stop here, however. As with Lévi-Strauss's Structuralism it promises a totalizing (albeit "humanist") worldview, a philosophy created out of Anthropology. "In reality what I found amongst the Kogi," continues Reichel-Dolmatoff,

was not a dried out corpus of data that could be made into an academic essay, but the coherent knowledge of a reality profoundly relevant for my own cultural tradition. The years I spent with the Kogi taught me that the detailed study of the last remaining societies, ineptly called "primitive," constitutes the last opportunity to know our own cultural roots

(ibid, I: 16, as well as on the back of the dust-jacket, thus easily accessible to the gaze of the public, an iconic declaration).

Into the Abyss: The Madonna and the dadaist

For what is important is to disconcert the staging of representation according to *exclusively* "masculine" parameters, that is, according to a phallocratic order. It is not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it — that would amount to the same thing in the end — but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an "outside" that is exempt, in part, from phallocratic law.

(Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," 1985)

I have thus tried to point out some of the powerful yet unstated connections between homesickness and conventional academic criteria of what constitutes a good "explanation" in the social sciences of our times. In particular, I have tried to stress how the elevation of the systemic side of the Nervous System's system is itself part of a strategy which, in the name of truth-making, reproduces the culture of the universal (meaning male) Subject. I have further tried to indicate that this is best achieved not through a "male bias" in selecting questions and "facts" but in the style or rhetoric of the explanation itself; specifically, the way explanations in the social sciences, as much as a feature film or a novel, for example, engage the reader into a Subject position. Surely it would be inconsistent to declare our procedures of explanation in the social sciences as autonomous from and hence easily separable from the rest of culture, which we see as the terrain of so many determinisms? And in this case that terrain is, as I have tried to indicate, the terrain of the woman's body itself — in so far as we can speak of such a body outside of its harnessed representations.

But what of the Nervous System's nervousness in all this? Is it this nervousness which can destroy such harnessed representations — as is hoped in the efforts by Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, or Helene Cixous, to create elusive, rupturing, pre-Oedipal, but post-modern, modes of representation? Or is this precisely just how the NS best functions anyway, always feinting, its aim being to structuralize nervousness and to make structure

nervous?

It is here where we encounter politics in action and reaction, in the play of power in institutions such as the family, the market, and the state — not forgetting our schools and our universities — where to the famous arbitrariness of the sign we note, via Franz Kafka, for example, the no less famous arbitrariness of power. This puts Deconstruction in a new light, the light of the Penal Colony.

When a man dies, nostalgia may set in and an image is sought to capture if not revivify his soul. This requires finding meaning in his life, and that means tracing some sort of connecting thread. This is even more the case with our mother's death, whose role it is (as with the Virgin) to hold that man's soul in a certain image of truth, if not truth-seeking. Take the case of Hugo Ball and the Madonna. We try to read Ball one way, but the nervousness of his system throws us into an-other way, the opposite way on which the first way depended. It is entirely plausible to see him as tripping up power in its own disorderliness. That is what I would call a post-modernist strategy. But it is also entirely plausible to see him — at the very same time of the Cabaret Voltaire creating sound poems and destroying language — as engaged in an "essentialist" recuperation of an Adamic language of naming. What we find here is the deeply perplexing question of realism which could be summed up by asking — So what if the sign is arbitrary, given that despite their fictive character, social conventions are nevertheless real? This is why it is simply not enough to belabor the point that gender, race, capital, shamanism, Africa . . . is "merely" a social construction (a fantasy, establishing a fictive whole). Its mere "mere-ness" is enough. This is where our criticism has stopped, as against a brick for the past few years, not knowing what to do with this strange and often violent power once it has been thus identified. The "arbitrariness of the sign" is constantly poised between and dependent upon the alternatives of essentialism and anarchy, and that is why we can read a dadaist like Ball in both these ways. The ritual performance of the Magical Bishop, now iconic of dada as a whole, aimed at a return to origins with, amongst other things, his wearing of a medicine-man's hat, and he relates (in his memoir, not the title, *Flight Out of Time*) the dramatic climax to his attempt to break language, collapsing into the rhythm of the Church, his subsequent break with dada, and his reconversion to Catholicism. In pondering why this failure has become such a powerful myth (for there is every reason to contest its veracity, except as a myth)⁷ we might note not only the attraction for tragic despair, but also the way the divine mother is recruited to hold the dead man's image in flight not out of time but back to the beginning of time. Sure we can read (Ball) in two opposed ways, fixing and slipping, but either way we have to remember Emmy Hennings's remembrance — Emmy Hennings whom Jean Arp described on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire as a Madonna doing the splits; Emmy Hennings who is criticized by Elderfield for trying to clean up Ball's dada act after his untimely death; Emmy Hennings who lived with Ball before, during, and after dada (and serendipitously started it). Ball wrote that at the moment of (supposed) crisis, when his sound poem was "saved" for rhythmic order, it seemed to him as if there was in his cubist mask (as he now calls it), the pale bewildered face of a ten-year-old boy, half-frightened, half-curious, hanging on the priest's words in the requiems and high masses in his home parish — and it is a slightly earlier version (for we are moving, still, back through time) of this boy whom Emmy Hennings portrays in her introduction to my edition of *Flight Out of Time*, the child who, because he could not sleep at night without all his family around his bed, made friends with the angels. For above his bed, she writes, there was a picture of the Sistine Madonna with two little angels at her feet, leaning on cushions of clouds. The boy's lips formed an outline over their wings, and in the morning there they were, having kept faithful watch. In this way he kept track of his growth; when he was seven, she says, he had been able to reach the

cloak, the skirt of the Queen of Heaven, with his lips, without having to stand up or stretch his toes.

Notes

1. Wholesome aspects of the NS in relation to wildness in the figure of the Indian and the third world Other form the substance of my recent book, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and The Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1987). In the present essay, "The Nervous System: Part 1 . . .," my intention is to complement and extend assumptions concerning colonialism, magic, and terror, on which that book is based, by sketching out what are to me critically important features of the theory of (self and) Other in the distinctions made in gender, sexuality, and the female body. In so doing, I wish to thank the participants in the seminar, Fall, 1987, "Shamanism and Tragedy," held in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University, for making me thus extend my thinking — particularly Mady Schutzman, Angelica Fester, Diana Halperin, and Martin Worman.

2. This discussion needs to be supplemented by a history of Saussure's forbears. See J.G. Merquior, *From Prague to Paris* (Verso, 1986: 10-12) and Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

3. I am restricting my sources to those cited by C. Lévi-Strauss in his article, "The Effectiveness of Symbols." I am unhappy using this word "soul" as a translation of the Cuna *purba*. So was Erwin Nordenskiöld, who wrote (1938: 334) that "*Purba* is the only word which the Cuna Indians who know some foreign language, translate as soul . . . but I still prefer not to translate it at all. It means so much." Later on he says that it is evident that the human body has several *purbas* (hair, nail, etc) "which together form an invisible replica of the body" (loc. cit.). An echo is also *purba*, as is the reflection of a person in water — but the Indians do not believe that it is the soul that they see in the water" (ibid: 355). Associated with *purba* is *niga* (as when the laboring woman says that Muu has stolen her *nigapurba* for good. *Niga* means something like life or animus, and Lévi-Strauss nicely sets up a Structuralist body when he suggests at the outset that this animus is the outcome of the harmonious integration of the body's various souls (1967: 184). This obviously has enormous ideological implications for totalizing views of self, person, and body, especially in the Lacanian perspective concerned with the reproduction of the universal subject and phallogocacy.

While on the subject of troublesome translation of key concepts I cannot refrain from breaking my self-imposed rule of only citing Cuna ethnography cited by Lévi-Strauss in his "Effectiveness of Symbols" essay so as to quote the following footnote from Norman M. Chapin's 1983 Ph.D. dissertation, "Curing Among the San Blas Kuna of Panama" (The K instead of the C(una) tells you immediately that a great deal of scientific labor on Cunerology has occurred since the 1940s). Much of the interpretive fate of the Muu-Igala hangs on the matters discussed in this footnote (page 425) which I find to be a quite extraordinary piece of writing. Is he pulling my leg? It reads:

The word 'penis' [as in the Holmer and Wassén translation of the Muu-Igala] is a mistranslation of *nusupane*, which means 'hummingbird.' This error was made because both *nusu* ('worm') and *pane* ('frigate bird') are common euphemisms for 'penis' in colloquial Kuna. The correct correspondence, however, is *nusu* ('worm') + *aipane* ('to move back and forth'). Thus: 'the worm that moves back and forth,' or 'hummingbird.'

Following this devastating moving back and forth along the metonymic chain, meant to explain and abolish the penis-mis/translation, Chapin goes on to say that on repeated questioning informants constantly denied that *nusupane* meant 'penis.'

Chapin spent a good deal of time in the San Blas islands in the late 1960s and mid-70s and objects sharply to Holmer and Wassén's and Lévi-Strauss' understanding of the landscape described in the Muu-Igala song as the landscape of the woman's body. But his own analysis confounds this objection, his point being that there is a micro/macro modeling of (1) the woman's body, (2) the soul, and (3) the Cuna cosmos. (I use all these terms — soul, the Cuna cosmos, etc. — with some awkwardness. Is there just one Cuna cosmos, for instance? Who says? Is it as coherent as the phrase insists? And so forth.) The problem of claiming a literality behind a metaphor, a true reality behind representation, is made even more vexing by this micro/macro nesting, such that it becomes extremely implausible (simply on logical grounds) to rest analysis, as Chapin does, on a strict separation of the metaphorical off from the literal and argue, for instance, that the cosmic landscape cannot or does not directly imply the human body as well. It should be noted that once the notion of metaphor is let out of the bag, especially when put into the micro/macro model, it becomes impossible to say which is the metaphor and which is the referent, which the copy and which the original — e.g. the cosmos or the body, the chicken or the egg? Indeed, Chapin's detailed analysis rests on the notion that the human body (in this case a woman's body) exists, or can exist, as a contemplative object, outside of its metaphorization and representation.

4. On this seemingly strange notion of *us* being party to *their* rites — by means of Anthropology — see my remarks on "redemptive method" in my essay "The Rise and Fall of Marxist Anthropology," *Social Analysis*, 21 (1987: 101-113).

5. I met a Cuna man in a basement apartment in Mexico City in 1976 and asked him about this problem. With some incredulity he responded, "Why! That's no problem. The medicine man doesn't sing to the woman. He sings to the spirits!"

Nordenskiöld (1938: 333-34) relates that his informant Ruben Pérez was stricken ill and treated by a shaman who sung for his abducted soul, similar to the basic dislocation addressed in the Muu-Igala song. Pérez says he fell asleep and dreamt as the treatment was undertaken, dreaming himself back to the situation in the forest where his spirit was stolen. does this indicate that it is unnecessary for the text to be understood for the song to be effective?

6. Teresa de Lauretis (1982: 123) draws attention to the way this Cuna song, as relayed by Lévi-Strauss, substantiates her argument (drawn, in part, from Jurij Lotman) concerning the gendered basis to the form of mythic narrative — and the options available to the female film spectator, if options be the right word, analogous to what she supposes to be going on with the laboring Cuna woman; a process of split identifying, either with the mobile thrusting male hero (shaman and helpers), or with the immobile, acted-upon, enclosing space of the woman, further split by being outside her own body watching it being entered.

7. The presentations of Ball's Magical Bishop act are many and varied. In addition to what I have described from Ball and Motherwell, there is Mel Gordon describing (1987: 15) Ball as going into a state of possession and flapping his wings at that inspired instant when he began reciting in the style of the Catholic liturgy. Gordon typically renders this as the climactic end to Ball's dada and radical political interests as well. On discrepancies in the representations of the Magical Bishop act, and its meaning and aftermath, see P.H. Mann, "Hugo Ball and the 'Magic Bishop' Episode: A Reconsideration," *New German Studies*, vol. 4, No.1 (1976: 43-52).

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