



CAST DOWN FROM MOUNT OLYMPUS W. J. THOMAS MITCHELL

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I don't know exactly when it was that I realized Wiko could not last forever. Of course I knew this, as we say, "intellectually", but I wasn't emotionally reconciled to it for quite awhile. In fact, I may never get over it. So many days of precious solitude to work, punctuated by convivial interludes with some of the loveliest people on earth. New friends, new ideas, and the new experience of "being European" for a year: all this has spoiled me rotten. Much as I love Chicago (both the city and the University), it will be hard to say farewell to all this.

When I submitted my application to Wiko, I was in the midst of a multi-year project called “Medium Theory” that has grown out of a lecture course I have been giving at University of Chicago and a student group called “The Chicago School of Media Theory”. The basic idea was to raise the question of the mediation of theoretical discourse itself. Why should we assume that “theory” is exclusively verbal, much less philosophical or analytical or even propositional? Wittgenstein remarks somewhere that propositions are usually thought to be the heart of a theory, but he notes as well that images, pictures, and metaphors also play a critical role, as that which allows a theory to be grasped “in a glance”, intuitively as it were. I have been exploring this notion for a number of years under the rubric of concepts such as “picture theory”, “the pictorial turn”, and “metapictures”. These are cases in which an artifact, an image, or an iconic form does more than simply represent or exemplify: it also conducts an implicit argument, or re-frames a concept, or reflects on the conditions of its own intelligibility. Plato called images of this sort “provocatives”, and I think that Benjamin’s “dialectical images” are the descendants of this tradition in the arts.

I already knew when I arrived at Wiko that I was going to be involved in a detour from this project. Although I continued reading in media theory and trying to reconcile its two strands – the political, mass-media approach pioneered by Chomsky and others, and the more “aesthetic”, arts-and-technology approach of critical theory – I was finding myself increasingly drawn into a contemporary issue that would not let me go. Or rather *two* or maybe even three contemporary issues whose relationship has haunted me in recent years and that seemed indissolubly linked at the same time that the precise character of their constellation was very difficult to formulate. The first is simply the peculiar character of what I want to call the “war of images” in the period since September 11, 2001, a period that was launched by the most widely publicized real time spectacle of political violence in human history. I don’t say it was the most violent, or most destructive event: clearly the destruction of the World Trade Center is relatively minor compared to the bombings of Dresden or Hiroshima, and it was an immediate act of rhetorical inflation to call the site of destruction “Ground Zero”, as if it had been a nuclear catastrophe. This spectacle of destruction was followed, as we know, by the launching of an American-led “war on terror” whose unfolding has been punctuated by a whole series of memorable images, from Colin Powell’s PowerPoint lecture to the United Nations on Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction, to the fall of Baghdad and the staged destruction of Saddam Hussein’s statues, to the “Mission Accomplished” photo opportunity that (prematurely) declared victory, to the scenes of mutilation, decapitation, and torture circulated by the Iraqi insurgency, to the

revelation of the Abu Ghraib photographs in the spring of 2004. I knew that, at the very least, it was the responsibility of art historians, iconologists, and media theorists to take stock of these images, to interpret them and insure that their meaning does not vanish from the historical record of 21st-century visual culture. I had begun amassing a data base of these images, including artistic reactions to September 11 and the War on Terror, since 2002, but it was the Abu Ghraib photos of American soldiers leering in triumph over the tortured bodies of Iraqis that convinced me that I had to drop longer-term projects and begin thinking in earnest about the images of this period.

But what sort of logic brings these images together, aside from their belonging to this period and the War on Terror? We can, of course, label the various images according to the events they recall (for instance, the notorious video tape-loop of Saddam Hussein's "dental examination" circulated by the Pentagon and repeated numerous times on world television). But is there anything to see in them besides what they represent? Do they have any significance beyond their momentary political efficacy as "iconic events" that influenced public opinion, or launched a scandal, or provoked investigations and official containment operations? What was (and is) the "life" of these images? I wanted to know. How do they circulate in memory and collective fantasy, and what can we learn from them that might be useful, as Benjamin put it, in producing diagnostic and prognostic theses about a contemporary political culture dominated by the specter of terror and the Janus-faced phenomenon of globalization. I also wanted to raise questions about the ethics of image contemplation as such. The transformation of images of violence, degradation, and horror into objects of interpretation, of aesthetic and even formal analysis, is already a morally compromised activity, and I wanted to reflect on this even as I was doing it. I could not shake off James Agee's admonition to viewers who would look at the photographs of suffering sharecroppers from the rural southern United States: "Who are you who will look at these photographs, and by what right, and what will you do about it?"

One thing was clear to me. I wanted to get beyond the immediate political stakes of these images to get at their deeper logic – the "icono-logic" that seems to determine their meaning and form, and their ways of addressing beholders. This became crystal clear to me on November 3, 2004, when I was scheduled to give a lecture entitled "Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 2001–2004" at the Hamburger Bahnhof. I had known for months that the American Presidential election would be held, if not decided, the previous day, and that any immediate political efficacy one might attribute to these images would have been overtaken by events. As the title of the lecture indicates, I had begun to locate the supplemen-

tary logic of these images in the contemporary phenomenon of *cloning*, the artificial reproduction of genetically identical life forms. The conjunction of cloning with terrorism had already struck me as a matter of literal, historical adjacency: the era of terrorism (already anticipated in the 1990s) coincides with the era of momentous breakthroughs in technoscience epitomized by cloning. The leading story in American newspapers on September 11, 2001 was the National Academy of Sciences report on stem cell research, a culmination of months of dissent from the determination of the Bush administration to severely limit scientific research in this area. And the political, ideological battle-lines over cloning continued to play a parallel role to the issue of the war on terror right up through the 2004 election. If terrorism (and the war in Iraq) was the main political issue of this election, cloning became the figurehead for a host of what were loosely called “moral” issues, namely abortion and gay marriage. Abortion is directly linked to the cloning issue insofar as stem cell research involves the destruction of embryonic organisms. And gay marriage raises the specter of reproduction without sexual difference, along with a host of other anxieties associated with heteronormativity. Homophobia and the fear of women taking control of reproduction, in other words, have a tendency to condense into a cluster of symptoms I want to call “clonophobia”, the fear of biological duplication or replication, arguably the central theme in science fiction novels and films at the turn of the 21st century. At the most general level, cloning had become a metaphor for contemporary fears about image-making as such, epitomizing the notion of images as things that have “lives of their own”, like viruses, spreading through a population and infecting it. The specter of clonal reproduction and bioterrorism converge, in other words, at a certain level of abstract fantasy in the popular imaginary.

There was, finally, the emergence in everyday, vernacular reflections on the “war on terror” of the phrase “cloning terror” itself. This expression was a convenient shorthand for the increasingly common observation that the American-led “war on terror” was having the effect of increasing, not diminishing, the threat of terrorism. Cloning seems the perfect metaphor to describe this perverse logic of creative destruction, in which the very effort to stamp out an enemy has the effect of strengthening that enemy. It also captures quite nicely the equivocal relation between the figurative and literal character of terrorism itself, as a war *of*, *by*, and *against* images, a fantasmatic war of propaganda, photo opportunities, and iconoclastic acts of symbolic destruction and mutilation, at the same time that it is a war of real, fleshly bodies, places, and material objectives.

I don't have space here to elaborate the way in which these issues surface in the actual images that have punctuated the war on terror from 2001 to 2004, but here is a brief inventory of some of the principal motifs: 1) the image of the terrorist/clone as uncanny double or "evil twin"; 2) the image of the terrorist/clone as a headless or faceless body, the masked warrior, or the hooded victim; 3) the association of cloning and terror with "biopictures" or image-organisms, as symbolic or real weapons, and figures of the enemy as a microbe hidden in "sleeper cells", as a cancerous growth or virus within the body politic.

I was helped immensely by a variety of colleagues at Wiko in exploring these issues. The *Bildwissenschaft* group or "Picture Boys" (plus Anca Oroveanu) provided a stimulating environment for reflection on the basic issues of image-theory, especially the problem of "image science" and "images in science" collectively explored by Horst Bredekamp (art history), Wolfram Högbe (philosophy), Eric Heller (physics), and Eberhard Fetz (neuroscience). Hajo Grundmann gave me a crash course on the theory and history of the immune system that helped me deepen the critique of terrorism (pioneered by Jacques Derrida) as an "autoimmune disorder". Our group of biologists, especially Kevin Foster and Boris Baer (the "Bug People") and next year's Fellow, Giuseppe Testa, provided me with crucial advice about the nature of cloning and its cultural, historical dimensions. Our amazing group of colleagues from the Middle East (Scheherezade Hassan, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Abdolkarim Soroush) and the working group "Modernity and Islam" helped me to understand the toxic character of racist stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, and invited me to participate in a conference on this subject in April. My understanding of the larger political context of the war on terror was stimulated greatly by the "Globalization Girls", especially Lydia Liu, Maria Todorova, Jamie Monson, Galit Hassan-Rokem, Ruth HaCohen, and Nancy Fraser, and by extensive conversations on the question of "political imaginaries" with Yaron Ezrahi.

But it is impossible to measure the subtle and far-reaching effects of daily conversations with Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, Eli Zaretsky, and many other Fellows, spouses, and members of the staff. The weekly colloquia provided dazzling displays of learning and wit, and a level of intellectual engagement that is unparalleled by any other institution I have been involved with. Above all, Wiko is a place of international, cosmopolitan consciousness-raising. My time here made me a confirmed lover of Berlin's endless cultural riches. It also completely re-oriented my North American coordinates, centering me for a time in Germany and Europe. Although I made a point of being at the Kolleg for almost every Tuesday colloquium throughout the year, I did extensive traveling and lecturing throughout

Europe and its borders, from Ireland to Palestine, Oslo to Istanbul, London to St. Petersburg, Bucharest to Budapest. I don't think I will ever get jaded about the experience of contemplating the departure boards in Tegel and Frankfurt airports, yearning after the magical destinations: Rome, Athens, Madrid, Paris, Amsterdam, Moscow. What is a simple country boy from Carson City, Nevada doing in places like these? How did they ever let me sneak into the Athenian palace of intellect known as Wiko? And when will they let me come back? My ping pong game is already deteriorating, here in exile.