THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

MICHAEL TAUSSIG

Routledge
New York • London
TACTILITY AND DISTRACTION

"Now, says Hegel, all discourse that remains discourse ends in boring man."
Alexander Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel

Quite apart from its open invitation to entertain a delicious anarchy, exposing principles no less than dogma to the white heat of daily practicality and contradiction, there is surely plurality in everydayness. My everyday has a certain routine, doubtless, but it is also touched by a deal of unexpectedness, which is what many of us like to think of as essential to life, to a metaphysics of life, itself. And by no means can my everyday be held to be the same as vast numbers of other people's in this city of New York, those who were born here, those who have recently arrived from other everyday's far away, those who have money, those who don't. This would be an obvious point, the founding orientation of a sociology of experience, were it not for the peculiar and unexamined ways by which "the everyday" seems, in the diffuseness of its ineffability, to erase difference in much the same way as do modern European-derived notions of the public and the masses.

This apparent erasure suggests the trace of a diffuse commonality in the commonweal so otherwise deeply divided, a commonality that is no doubt used to manipulate consensus but also promises the possibility of other sorts of nonexploitative solidarities which, in order to exist at all, will have to at some point be based on a common sense of the everyday and, what is more, the ability to sense other everydayneses.

But what sort of sense is constitutive of this everydayness? Surely this sense includes much that is not sense so much as sensuousness, an embodied and somewhat automatic "knowledge" that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational; as such it not only challenges practically all critical practice,
across the board, of academic disciplines but is a knowledge that lies as much in the objects and spaces of observation as in the body and mind of the observer. What’s more, this sense has an activist, constructivist bent; not so much contemplative as it is caught in *media res* working on, making anew, amalgamating, acting and reacting. We are thus mindful of Nietzsche’s notion of the senses as bound to their object as much as their organs of reception, a fluid bond to be sure in which, as he says, “seeing becomes seeing *something*.” For many of us, I submit, this puts the study of ideology, discourse, and popular culture in a somewhat new light. Indeed, the notion of “studying,” innocent in its unwinking ocularity, may itself be in for some rough handling too.

I was reminded of this when as part of my everyday I bumped into Jim in the hallway of PS 3 (New York City Public School Number Three) where he and I were dropping off our children. In the maze of streaming kids and parents, he was carrying a bunch of small plastic tubes and a metal box, which he told me was a pump, and he was going to spend the morning making a water fountain for the class of which his daughter, age eight, was part. She, however, was more interested in the opportunity for the kids to make molds of their cupped hands and then convert the molds into clam shells for the fountain. I should add that Jim and his wife are sculptors, and their home is also their workplace, so Petra, their daughter, probably has an unusually developed everyday sense of sculpting.

It turned out that a few days back Jim had accompanied the class to the city’s aquarium in Brooklyn which, among other remarks, triggered the absolutely everyday but continuously fresh insight, on my part as much as his, that here we are, so enmeshed in the everydayness of the city that we rarely bother to see its sights, such as the aquarium. “I’ve lived here all of seventeen years,” he told me, “and never once been there or caught the train out that way.” And he marveled at the things he’d seen at the station before the stop for the aquarium—it was a station that had played a prominent part in a Woody Allen film. He was especially struck by the strange script used for public signs. And we went on to complete the thought that when we were living in other places, far away, we would come to the city with a program of things to see and do, but now, living every day in the shadow and blur of all those particular things, we never saw them any more, imagining, fondly, perhaps, that they were in some curious way part of us, as we were part of them. But now Jim and Petra were back from the visit to the aquarium. He was going to make a fountain, and she was going to make molds of hands that would become clam shells.

“The revealing presentations of the big city,” wrote Walter Benjamin in his uncompleted *Passagenwerk*, “are the work of those who have traversed the city absently, as it were, lost in thought or worry.” And in his infamously popular and difficult essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” written in the mid-1930s, he drew a sharp distinction between contemplation and distraction. He wants to argue that contemplation—which is what academicism is all about—is the studied, eye full, aloneness with and absorption into the “aura” of the always aloof, always distant, object. The ideal-type for this could well be the worshipper alone with God, but it was the art-work (whether cult object or bourgeois “masterpiece”) before the invention of the camera and the movies that Benjamin had in mind. On the other hand, “distraction” here refers to a very different apperceptive mode, the type of flitting and barely conscious peripheral vision perception unleashed with great vigor by modern life at the crossroads of the city, the capitalist market, and modern technology. The ideal-type here would not be God but movies and advertising, and its field of expertise is the modern everyday.

For here not only the shock-rhythm of modernity so literally expressed in the motion of the business cycle, the stock exchange, city traffic, the assemblyline and Chaplin’s walk, but also a new magic, albeit secular, finds its everyday home in a certain tactility growing out of distracted vision. Benjamin took as a cue here Dadaism and architecture, for Dadaism not only stressed the uselessness of its work for contemplation, but that its work “became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality.” He went on to say that Dadaism thus promoted a demand for film, “the distracting element of which,” and I quote here for emphasis, “is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assault the spectator.” As for architecture, it is especially instructive because it has served as the prototype over millennia not for perception by the contemplative individual, but instead by the distracted collectivity. To the question ‘How in our everyday lives do we know or perceive a building?’ Benjamin answers through
usage, meaning, to some crucial extent, through touch, or better still, we might want to say, by proprioception, and this to the degree that this tactility, constituting habit, exerts a decisive impact on optical reception.

Benjamin set no small store by such habitual, or everyday, knowledge. The tasks facing the perceptual apparatus at turning points in history, cannot, he asserted, be solved by optical, contemplative, means, but only gradually, by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation. It was this everyday tactility of knowing which fascinated him and which I take to be one of his singular contributions to social philosophy, on a par with Freud's concept of the unconscious.

For what came to constitute perception with the invention of the nineteenth-century technology of optical reproduction of reality was not what the unaided eye took for the real. No. What was revealed was the optical unconscious—a term that Benjamin willingly allied with the psychoanalytic unconscious but which, in his rather unsettling way, he so effortlessly confounded subject with object such that the unconscious at stake here would seem to reside more in the object than in the perceiver. Benjamin had in mind both camera still shots and the movies, and it was the ability to enlarge, to frame, to pick out detail and form unknown to the naked eye, as much as the capacity for montage and shocklike abutment of dissimilars, that constituted this optical unconscious which, thanks to the camera, was brought to light for the first time in history. And here again the connection with tactility is paramount, the optical dissolving, as it were, into touch and a certain thickness and density, as where he writes that photography reveals "the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds which dwell in the smallest things, meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable." Hence this tactile optics, this physiognomic aspect of visual worlds, was critically important because it was otherwise inconspicuous, dwelling neither in consciousness nor in sleep, but in waking dreams. It was a crucial part of a more exact relation to the objective world, and thus it could not but problematize consciousness of that world, while at the same time intermingling fantasy and hope, as in dream, with waking life. In rewiring seeing as tactility, and hence as habitual knowledge, a sort of technological or secular magic was brought into being and sustained. It displaced the earlier magic of the aura of religious and cult works in a pretechnological age and did so by a process that is well worth our attention, a process of demystification and reenchantment, precisely, as I understand it, Benjamin's own self-constituting and contradictorily montaged belief in radical, secular, politics and messianism, as well as his own mimetic form of revolutionary poetics.

For if Adorno reminds us that in Benjamin's writings "thought presses close to its object, as if through touching, smelling, tasting, it wanted to transform itself," we have also to remember that mimesis was a crucial feature for Benjamin and Adorno, and it meant both copying and sensuous materiality—what Frazer in his famous chapter on magic in The Golden Bough, coming out of a quite different and far less rigorous philosophic tradition, encompassed as imitative or homeopathic magic, on the one side, and contagious magic, on the other. Imitative magic involves ritual work on the copy (the wax figurine, the drawing or the photograph), while in contagious magic the ritualist requires material substance (such as hair, nail parings, etc.) from the person to be affected. In the multitude of cases that Frazer presented in the 160-odd pages he dedicated to the "principles of magic," these principles of copy and substance are often found to be harnessed together, as with the Malay charm made out of body exuviae of the victim sculpted into his likeness with wax and then slowly scorched for seven nights while intoning. "It is not wax that I am scorching, it is the liver, heart, and Spleen of So-and-so that I scorched," and this type of representation hitching likeness to substance is borne out by ethnomorphic research throughout the 20th century.

This reminder from the practice of that art form known as "magic" (second only to advertising in terms of its stupendous ability to blend aesthetics with practicality), that mimesis implies both copy and substantial connection, both visual replication and material transfer, not only neatly parallels Benjamin's insight that visual perception as enhanced by new optical copying technology has a decisively material, tactile, quality, but underscores his specific question as to what happens to the apparent withering of the mimetic faculty with the growing up of the Western child and the world historical cultural revolution we can allude to as Enlightenment, it being his clear thesis that children, anywhere, any time, and people in ancient times and so-called primitive societies are endowed by their circumstance with considerable miming prowess. Part of his answer to the question as to what
happens to the withering-away of the mimetic faculty is that it is precisely the function of the new technology of copying reality, meaning above all the camera, to reinstall that mimetic prowess in modernity.

Hence a powerful, film criticism which, to quote Paul Virilio quoting the New York video artist, Nam June Paik, “Cinema isn’t I see, it’s I fly,” or Dziga Vertov’s camera in perpetual movement, “I fall and I fly at one with the bodies falling or rising through the air,” registering not merely our sensuous blending with filmic imagery, the eye acting as a conduit for our very bodies being absorbed by the filmic image, but the resurfacing of a vision-mode at home in the pre-Oedipal economy of the crawling infant, the eye grasping, as Gertrude Koch once put it, at what the hand cannot reach. 8

And how much more might this be the case with advertising, quintessence of America’s everyday? In “This Space For Rent,” a fragment amid a series of fragments entitled “One Way Street,” written between 1925 and 1928, Benjamin anticipated the themes of his essay on mechanical reproduction, written a decade later, claiming it was a waste of time to lament the loss of distance necessary for criticism. For now the most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things, is the advertisement, and this “abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careers at us out of a film screen.” To this tactility of a hit between the eyes is added what he described as “the insistent, jerky, nearness” with which commodities were thus hurtled, the overall effect dispatching “matter-of-factness” by the new, magical world of the optical unconscious, as huge leathered cowboys, horses, cigarettes, toothpaste, and perfect women straddle walls of buildings, subway cars, bus stops, and our living rooms via TV, so that sentimentality, as Benjamin put it, “is restored and liberated in American style, just as people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again by films.” It is money that moves us to these things whose power lies in the fact that they operate upon us viscerally. Their warmth stirs sentient springs. “What in the end makes advertisements so superior to criticism?” asks Benjamin. “Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.” 9

This puts the matter of factness of the everyday on a new analytic footing, one that has for too long been obscured in the embrace of a massive tradition of cultural and sociological analysis searching in vain for grants that would give it distance and perspective. Not what the neon says, but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt; not language, but image; and not just the image but its tactility and the new magic thereof with the transformation of roadway parking-lot bitumen into legendary lakes of fire-ringed prophecy so that once again we cry and, presumably, we buy, just as our ability to calculate value is honed to the razor’s edge. It is not a question, therefore, of whether or not we can follow de Certeau and combat strategies with everyday tactics that fill with personal matter the empty signifiers of postmodernity, because the everyday is a question not of universal semiotics but of capitalist mimetics. Nor, as I understand it is this the Foucauldian problem of being programmed into subjecthood by discursive regimes, for it is the sentient reflection in the fiery pool, its tactility, not what the neon sign says, that matters, all of which puts reading, close or otherwise, literal or metaphorical, in another light of dubious luminosity.

This is not to indulge in the tired game of emotion versus thought, body versus mind, recycled by current academic fashion into concern with “the body” as key to wisdom. For where can such a program end but in the tightening of paradox; an intellectual containment of the body’s understanding? What we aim at is a more accurate, a more mindful, understanding of the play of mind on body in the everyday and, as regards academic practice, nowhere are the notions of tactility and distraction more obviously important than in the need to critique what I take to be a dominant critical practice which could be called the “allegorizing” mode of reading ideology into events and artifacts, cockfights and carnivals, advertisements and film, private and public spaces, in which the surface phenomenon, as in allegory, stands as a cipher for uncovering horizon after horizon of otherwise obscure systems of meanings. This is not merely to argue that such a mode of analysis is simple-minded in its search for “codes” and manipulative because it superimposes meaning on “the natives’ point of view.” Rather, as I now understand this practice of reading, its very understanding of “meaning” is ungenial; its weakness lies in its assuming a contemplative individual when it should, instead, assume a distracted collective reading with a tactile eye. This I take
to be Benjamin's contribution, profound and simple, novel yet familiar, to
the analysis of the everyday, and unlike the readings we have come to know
of everyday life, his has the strange and interesting property of being cut,
so to speak, from the same cloth as that which it raises to self-awareness.
For his writing, which is to say the very medium of his analysis, is constituted
by a certain tactility, by what we could call the objectness of the object,
such that (to quote from the first paragraph of his essay on the mimetic
faculty) "His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment
of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like
something else." This I take to be not only the verbal form of the "optical
unconscious," but a form which, in an age wherein analysis does little more
than reconstitute the obvious, is capable of surprising us with the flash of
a profane illumination.

And so my attention wanders away from the Museum of Natural History
on Central Park, upon which so much allegorical "reading," as with other
museums, has been recently expended, back to the children and Jim at the
aquarium. It is of course fortuitous, overly fortuitous you will say, for my
moral concerning tactility and distraction that Jim is a sculptor, but there
is the fact of the matter. And I cannot but feel that in being stimulated by
the "meaning" of the aquarium to reproduce with the art of mechanical
reproduction its watery wonderland by means of pumps and plastic tubes,
Jim's tactile eye and ocular grasp have been conditioned by the distractedness
of the collective of which he was part, namely the children. Their young
eyes have blended a strangely dreamy quality to the tactility afforded the
adult eye by the revolution in modern means of copying reality, such that
while Jim prefers a fountain, Petra suggests moulds of kids' hands that will
be its clam shells.