Mimesis and Alterity

I have earlier alluded to as a kind of electricity, an ac/dc pattern of rapid oscillations of difference. It is the artful combination, the playing with the combinatorial perplexity, that is necessary; a magnificent excessiveness over and beyond the fact that mimesis implies alterity as its flip-side. The full effect occurs when the necessary impossibility is attained, when mimesis becomes alterity. Then and only then can spirit and matter, history and nature, flow into each others' otherness.

THE TALKING MACHINE

Along with his scientists and negro laborers, Marsh took quite a bit of equipment on his 1924 expedition in search of white Indians—an outboard motor, wireless equipment weighing approximately one ton, including a 60-foot telescoping mast, a military field stove, a folding canvas deck chair for every white man, the trunk of gifts weighing some 370 pounds, firearms, ammunition sufficient for what was called a field military force, dynamite, fireworks, and two portable victrolas with a large and varied assortment of records.

Except for the dynamite, used for blasting apart logs jamming the river, the more obviously military equipment was useless: the heavy uniforms, the wireless, and the firearms. Even the outboard motor proved of limited value. What turned out to be effective and came to be considered as essential were the more obviously playful “cultural” items: the gifts, the fireworks, and the victrolas. Time and again the fireworks and the victrolas provided spectacles of civilized primitivism, exchanges of magic and of metamagic satisfying to both primitive and civilized.

Dynamiting their way upriver through log-jams into what they considered to be dangerous Indian territory in the interior of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the explorers came across tracks of Indians and turkey feathers in odd design, which Barbino, the old negro, said were magic signs. Later on they came across twenty-one such feathers stuck in a row; one for each member of the expedition.) There was not an Indian to be seen:
MIMESIS AND ALTERITY

Whatever the Indians might be planning to do, they were certainly watching us. So that evening on the Chiari we gave them an exhibition. Benton fired a volley from his Luger automatic, and I touched off an arm signal rocket—the kind which goes up several hundred feet and explodes, leaving floating green lights which last for some time. That was to offset the Indians’ magic.1

Other times the exhibitions were less obviously militant, defined by Marsh as intended for entertainment. One of the more touching textures was their very timing. These were not the feasts of the Indians that went on day after day, but after-dinner events, when a northern man, sucking reflectively on a pipe, looked for a little peace of mind—and a little entertainment, only in this case, deep in the Darién, entertainment rested on entertaining the Indians, finding amusement in their amusement. As Marsh enthused after his first night in a “Chocoi” chief’s house (the negroes being compelled to spend the night in the cane, not being allowed to approach the house or mingle with the Indians:

With the evening meal over, and our mosquito bars suspended from the rafters over our sleeping quarters, the curiosity of our hosts demanded entertainment. Darkness had come suddenly. So we started our program with a military sky-rocket. Then the portable victrola was produced. After my experiences in the Darién I would never think of going into a “wild” Indian territory without a phonograph. Time and again we were to encounter surly, unfriendly, and even menacing Indians. We would appear to ignore them entirely. We would bring out and start a record while proceeding with our regular task of camp-pitching or what-not. The attention of the Indians would soon be diverted from us to the “music-box.” Their hostility would cease and be replaced by curiosity. Gradually they would draw closer to the instrument, discussing it among themselves and finally would end up by crowding around it as closely as possible, touching and feeling it. From then on they would often keep us playing it until midnight, and were no longer our enemies though perhaps not yet our friends. That victrola, our fireworks, outboard motors and dynamite were four essentials without which we could never have traversed interior Darién.”

The victrola must have brought the explorers a good deal of pleasure, not least on account of the pleasure it brought the Indians. It proved

The Talking Machine

Earliest and latest phonographs, ca. 1908.

...to be an easy way for making an intercultural nexus, a new cultural zone of white and Indian social interaction for discovering strangeness and confirming sameness—as when Marsh was teaching Cuna chief Mata’s daughter Carmelita to dance to the victrola’s music, her father contentedly smoking his pipe topped up with a gift of American Navy tobacco. “It was as happy a family group as I have ever seen,” wrote Marsh—a remark that brings to mind the soothing blend of family and mining machinery sponsored in the ubiquitous advertisements of the Columbia Phonograph Company as early as 1895 in U.S. magazines.

They pictured, according to a scholarly study aptly entitled The Fabulous Phonograph:

...a family in a moment of rapt delight: grandfather sitting relaxed in an easy chair, his son and daughter-in-law standing attentively to his either side, and his grandson—clad in knee breeches and a Little Lord Fauntleroy jacket—hopping up and down between his legs. The attention
of all four was directed to the horn protruding from a small phonograph on a near-by table. They were clearly being entertained in imposing fashion by “the machine that talks—and laughs, sings, plays, and reproduces all sound.”

“You marry Carmelita,” said the chief, “and you will be chief of all the Tacaruna tribes, and we will be rich and powerful as we used to be.”

Marsh hesitated.

The chief offered him the “girl on the hillside” too, the woman who woke him up with hot chocolate and bare skin—all this in a society and in a text woven taut by men drawing boundaries between women and foreigners.

Marsh felt he had to decline the offer. Carmelita rushed away crying. Marsh put “Madam Butterfly” on the victrola and smoked his pipe.

Elsewhere in the land of the Cunas this intimate scene depicted by Marsh was played out on a grander and more tempestuous stage. There, victrolas threatened to break the barriers separating Cuna women from Panamanian (“negro”) men, symbolizing the immediate causes of the 1925 Cuna revolt. The Panamanian police enforced attendance at social clubs (originally begun by young Cuna men back from the cities) at which there was Western-style dancing to phonograms playing Panamanian “folk” music as well as U.S.-derived trot et and jazz—much to the distaste of Cuna parents and elders. The Cuna High Chief (nele) is recorded in Baron Nordenskiöld’s compilation as declaring:

And they began to force us to do hard labor and to carry heavy stones to the schoolhouses. If we had a headache they took no notice of it but we had to work hard just the same and they began to beat us with chains and ropes and they began to build club houses where they could dance with our women and our daughters and if we would not let our wives dance they put us in prison. And they began to speak to our people and say that we did not have anybody who could help us. They began to take off our women’s nose-rings and ear-rings and the police dragged our women to the police houses and took the rings from their nose and broke them into pieces [and] thus they led our women to darkness and sin.
Mimesis and Alterity

Thus with its transports of Western delight that magnificent minding machine, the victrola, was important in making the scene, providing the occasion for non-Cuna men to gain access to Cuna women, mainstay of the image-politics of Cuna Being. No wonder the chiefs and elders were mad. (And surely not only among the Cuna? The spread of U.S. popular culture throughout the world, from the beginning of the twentieth century, owes an enormous amount to the music reproduced by the phonograph. Indeed, the great contribution of the U.S. to world history has been precisely the shaping of the world’s ears and eyes—not to mention “morals”—by popular music and Hollywood.)

Colonial Photography

I am not so much concerned with a “sociology” of the phonograph or camera or their effect on “the natives.” The more important question lies with the white man’s fascination with their fascination with these mimetically capacious machines. Here the camera compared with the phonograph provides relevant material.

While there appears to have been a lot of photography on Marsh’s first expedition in search of white Indians, it barely rates a mention in comparison with the reproduction of sound by the victrola. Marsh had obtained the support of military photography, undertaken prior to the expedition. He needed to reconnoitre the unknown valley, verify its existence and extent, and locate as many Indian villages as he could. The commander of the Canal Zone Air Force provided him with two planes, one of which carried an expert military photographer equipped with a large military camera. Whenever Marsh’s plane signaled, the second was to take a picture. But in all of this there is not hint of magic. On the contrary, it is very much an enthusiastic ride with “technology” as something antithetical to “magic.” The planes and the big camera provide a nonchalant feeling of material and scientific power over the landscape and people below, who will soon be subjects for hand-held cameras.

Photographing the Indians was seen as an essential part of scientific investigation. Indeed photography seems to be emblematic, to verify the existence of the scientific attitude as much as the existence of that which was photographed. A fragment from Baer’s diary, published posthumously in the American Journal of Physical Anthropology by his boss at the Smithsonian, Ales Hrdlicka, reveals how obsessive and necessary to “doing science” this was:

Indians: Camp Townsend: Saturday, Feb. 9: Put up charts for taking ran and height measurements.
Sunday Feb 10: Jose Mata and family gave us a call. Took pictures of him and squaw. Jose made her put on new dress for the occasion and naked son would not appear.
Tuesday Feb 12: Group of Chocos arrived. Snapped man and ten year old daughter.
Wednesday, Feb 13: Awakened by chatter of Chocos in Marsh’s tent. Morning spent photographing and studying group of dozen children.
Thursday, Feb 14: Measured a number of Cunas and a few Chocos. Photographed Jose and family, also courting Chocos.

Other times Marsh speaks of Cuna men in the mountains running to him for protection from being photographed, but when the alliance between him and the Cuna chiefs is cemented on the San Blas coast, and all the white Indians he wants are promised to him, then everything can be photographed in mini-rituals of scienticity. And even here, with the doors to the Cuna kingdom flung wide open, there is little wonder recorded at either the camera or the resulting photos. When we see the later, as in Marsh’s own book with the frontispiece photograph of “Mimi” the white Indian girl, they seem to evacuate aura and normality—“over-normalize.” You ask yourself, “So what?” But when it comes to filming the phonograph in action on the colonial frontier, everything changes. Here every effort is made to represent mimetic technology as magical, and the question must be repeated—because the phonographic *mis en scène* is surprisingly common in eighteenth-century descriptions of “primitive” peoples—as to why westerners are so fascinated by Others’ fascination with this apparatus.
Colonial Phonography

Who can forget, in what has become one of the classics of ethnographic film, Nanook of the North's look of wild disbelief on hearing sound emerge from the white man's phonograph, and then trying to eat the record? Mimetic sensuousness incarnate! Except for one factor; shouldn't we assume that this look and this eating is a contrivance not of the "primitive" but of the primitivist film-maker Robert Flaherty—a set-up job. Mimesis of mimesis; a link in the chain of what Horstheimer and Adorno called "the organization of mimesis."

That Flaherty's intention was above all mimetological, that the eye was to become more an organ of tactility than vision, is made clear in the commentary of his wife and long-time cinematic collaborator Frances Hubbard Flaherty. Yet despite an apparent convergence here between her views of the new eye created by cinema and that of semi-carry Soviet cinema theory (and Benjamin's extension of that theory), there is also a wide divergence. As against the logic of shock, montage, and profane illumination, Flaherty wallows in a discourse of spiritual unity to be achieved through the mimetic and sensuous possibilities now offered the human sensuality by cinema, and she does so by recruiting the sensory apparatus of the primitive, Nanook of the North, to do so—a wondrous if not somewhat sinister feat.

She begins with her husband's film image of a potter's hand an image lovingly used by Benjamin, too, in his essay on the storyteller, his point being that the storyteller's presence and life are impressed into the tale just as the imprints of the potter's hand are impressed in the clay). In the same way that the potter's hand caresses the yielding clay, for Flaherty the cinematic image shall caress the yielding eye; the body it contains: "Take, for instance, the hands of the potter as he molds the clay," she writes:

The motion-picture camera can follow these movements closely, intimately, so intimately that as with our eyes we follow, we come to feel those movements as a sensation in ourselves. Momentarily we touch and know the very heart and mind of the potter; we partake, as it were, of his life, we are one with him. Here through those nuances of movement we found in Flaherty's 1924 film Moana we come again to that "participation mystique" we found in Nanook (1922). Here is the "way" of the camera, of this machine: through its sensitivity to movement it can take us into a new dimension of seeing, through the mysterious rhythmic impulses of life and love take us inward into the spirit, into the unity of the spirit.

I doubt whether a more emphatically clear statement has even been made concerning the intimate relationship between primitivism and the new theories of the senses circulating with the new means of reproduction. And this I take to be the relevance of Robert Flaherty's mimetic display of Nanook's wonderment at the phonograph and objecting the record to the viscerality of his tongue and teeth. Here we alleged primitivism of the great hunter of the north, his very teeth, as less, dramatobiotically engage with the claims being made by the Modernist (Frances Flaherty) for the spiritual unities of life now reeled by film.

Here the logic of mystical participation between subject and object, between Primitive person and the world (as advanced by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, for instance), is reborn thanks to reproductive technology. It is therefore curious, that this rebirth discussed in Modernist theory with overwhelming predominance in terms of the optical medium of cinema, highlighted by the mise en scène of the phonograph.

This eating of sound by the great hunter, or rather of the reproducing instrument of sound, this mimesis of mimesis, is nicely matched by Robert Flaherty's story retold by his wife, printed opposite a photograph of a dark-skinned Nanook in furry pants peering skeptically into a phonograph delicately perched on a pile of furs. A European man, perhaps Flaherty, is seen on the other side of the phonograph, carefully looking not at the machine but at the great hunter looking at it. The caption reads: "Nanook: How the white man 'cans' his voice." The story is that when Flaherty decided to explain to the Eskimos what he was doing as a film-maker, he developed some footage of Nanook staring a walrus, hung a Hudson Bay blanket on the wall, and invited them all in, men, women, and children. What happened then is not only one of a very long and endlessly fascinating series of dramas, told of "first contact" of primitive man with the machine, but one
of the great stagings wherein the mighty mimetic power of the new
artefact of mechanical reproduction, namely film, meets up with
the mighty mimetic prowess—the epistemology of “mystical participa-
tion”—of the Primitive:

The projector light shone out. There was complete silence in the hut.
They saw Nanook. But Nanook was there in the hut with them, and they
couldn’t understand. Then they saw the walrus, and then, said Bob
Flaherty, pandemonium broke loose. "Hold him!" they screamed.
"Hold him!" and they scrambled over the chairs and each other to get to
the screen and help Nanook hold that walrus!

It needed the image of the mighty animal, the walrus thrashing in
the surf at the end of a line, not Nanook, to convert the confusion in
the spectator’s minds into mimetic veracity. Moreover—and now its
turn to be a little disoriented by representational gymnastics—
the Eskimos had seen, or rather, participated in this screening,
"There was no talk of anything," writes Frances Hubbard Flaherty,
but more hunting scenes for the "aggie," as they called the picture."

Then what of Werner Herzog’s delirious effort in his film Fitzcarraldo,
set in the early twentieth-century Upper Amazonian rubber
boom and constructed around the fetish of the phonograph, so tena-
ciously, so awkwardly, clutched by Fitzcarraldo, the visionary, its great
arch emerging from under the armpit of his dirty white suit, Caruso
fording the forests and rivers, the Indians amazed as Old Europe rains
spectacum art form upon them. Bellowing opera from the ship’s prow,
in the great ear-trumpet of the phonograph, an orchid of technology
in the thick forests of the primitive, that cleaves the waters and holds
an tiny Indians at bay as the patched-up river-steamer wends its
way into this South American heart of darkness.

This same unfolding orchid of technology, now in delicate, worn
sides of purple and pink, appears at crucial moments in The Camp
at Tarij, a film made in 1988 by the Senegalese director Ousmane
Sembène (whose films are censored in Senegal). This phonograph is
in the proud possession of a Senegalese sergeant serving in the Free French
Army during World War II. He and his fellow Senegalese soldiers now

Nanook of the North: “The extra-social nature of the ice pack as a
social experience,” (from Frances H. Flaherty, 1984).
await discharge from the French army on Senegalese soil. Having suffered the Nazis, they now find they have to confront the racism of their own white officers. One Senegalese soldier has lost his mind in Buchenwald and through frenzied gesticulations insists on wearing a Germany Army “coal-scuttle” helmet bedecked with swastikas. Mining the Nazi soldiers, he becomes the elusive enemy of his enemies, the enemy of his French colonial masters. His shockingly disjointed presence, his dark-black face surrounded by this German helmet, his body at attention on a French parade ground in Africa, presages the shocking end of the film, when the entire company of black soldiers is wiped out by tank and machinegun fire at the orders of the French high command for staging a rebellion over the humiliating terms of demobilization.

But there is this other disjointedness as well, another elusive and complex form of miming Europe, and this is the sergeant’s prize possession, the phonograph, spectral in the fetishicity of the looming form of the massive car-trumpet so ponderously balanced over the tiny needle moving up and down on the discs of what in the film are referred to as the great music of the Western classical tradition. It is this that he listens to in the spartan simplicity of his barrack-room as he writes to his white wife and their daughter in Paris. It is this machine and is
reproduced music that tugs at the attention of the stream of film; imagery as much as that of the white officers from France, in ways gratifying, in ways unsettling, as with graceful ease this black man evokes and assimilates the taste of Old Europe in the privacy of his room by means of its replayed music. On the one hand, it is pleasing to the officers to see this man becoming like them through a machine whose job it is to reproduce likeness. On the other, it is profoundly disturbing to them because this man is using this machine to manufacture likeness. Thanks in part to this machine, he is not only too comfortable with European culture, but he shows the way for a “new man” who can be both black and white, Senegalese and French. This is why the image of the phonograph in this film approaches that of an icon with the terrible ambivalence of the sacred coursing the circuitry of mimesis and alterity binding civilization to its savagery.

In this iconic power lies what Fitz Roy, Captain of Darwin’s good ship, HMS Beagle, termed in 1832 the absorbing interest “in observing people displaying childish ignorance of matters familiar to civilized man.” One hundred and fifty years later Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson’s film First Contact provides just such a display—a display of the display, we might say. Using footage of First Contact filmed by an Australian gold prospector in the early 1930s in highland New Guinea, Connolly and Anderson are able to breathlessly capture this mythic moment, the white man drawing open the curtain of world history to reveal and revel in Otherness incarnate—and to do so spectacularly, thanks to the prospector having filmed his phonograph performing its mimetic wonders against the backdrop of the savage visage. As the sprightly tune “Looking On The Bright Side of Life” takes our acoustic memories Westward, the camera takes us through the optical unconscious into the needle rising and falling on the disc and then abruptly to the elongated, bearded faces of the highlanders staring stock-still in apparent amazement at the sound emerging from the machine. (“We thought it was our ancestors singing,” they tell Connolly and Anderson decades later.) Not content with this, the prospector picks up the phonograph and thrusts it across the waist-high fishtail that the whites always erect as a barrier to mark out their camp. He wants the highland women to dance. His movements are somewhat awkward, even grotesque, as he lunges at people across the clearly marked frontier with this precariously balanced music box. It’s as if he is more obsessed with white man’s magic than the natives are, and his obsession demands showing showing. First he has to show the phonograph in action to them. Then he has to capture the phonograph display on film. Then years later, correctly anticipating the late nineteenth-century Euro-American hunger for such revelation, Connolly and Anderson display the display for us—and repeat it more than once, notably and lengthily at the very end of the film First Contact, as the credits roll to the dazzling incongruity-effect of “Looking On The Bright Side of Life.” (“We thought it was our ancestors singing,” thought I heard someone say.)

Light is perhaps shed on the white man’s fascination with Other’s fascination with white man’s magic when we read in the prospector’s book about a highland boy, Narmu, whom he sent as a sort of natural experiment to the town of Lae by aeroplane ion 1932. Extracted from the Stone Age to the store age by one swift flight, the boy listened to a phonograph, and saw an electric light, and wore out the switch turning the light on and off again. Gurney [the pilot] said that to the electric light the thing that seemed to interest Narmu most in the heap of tin cans and bottles.” First Contact has a dizzying scene of a highlander reconceptualizing how as a kid he fearfully stole the lid of a tin can thrown away as garbage by the prospector, and worked it into a flashy ornament for his head. But unfortunately First Contact is so preoccupied to film those heaps of tin cans and bottles, for even though garbage is the outstanding sign of Western civilization—as Narmu perceived—it is not the side-effect of mechanical production that is congenial to the staging of First Contact, but rather the aftertaste of its mimetic machination.

**Mimetic Surplus**

It seems crucial about the fascination with the Other’s fascination with the talking machine is the magic of mechanical reproduction itself. In the West this magic is inarticulable and is understood as the
technological substance of civilized identity-formation. Neither the prospector filming in the early 1930s in the New Guinea highlands nor Fitzcarraldo in the jungles of the Upper Amazon in the early twentieth century could make a phonograph, or an electric lightbulb switch for that matter. Vis à vis the savage they are the masters of these wonders that, after the first shock waves of surprise upon their invention and commercialization in the West, pass into the everyday. Yet these shocks rightly live on in the mysterious underbelly of the technology—to be eviscerated as “magic” in frontier rituals of technological supremacy.

To take the talking machine to the jungle is to emphasize and embellish the genuine mystery and accomplishment of mechanical reproduction in an age when technology itself, after the flurry of excitement at a new breakthrough, is seen not as mystique or poetry but as routine. Taking the talking machine to the jungle is to do more than impress the natives and therefore oneself with Western technology’s power, the Elto outboard motor compared to the wooden paddle; it is to reinstall the mimetic faculty as mystery in the art of mechanical reproduction, reinvigorating the primitivism implicit in technology’s wildest dreams, therewith creating a surfeit of mimetic power.

Mary Had A Little Lamb

Moreover Westerners would do well to be reminded of the magic of sound-reproduction in their recent histories—their fascination with the introduction of transistor cassette recorders in their lifetimes, and beyond that the effect of the first sound recorders and reproducers in 1877 in the United States. The article that introduced Edison’s “talking machine” to the informed public in the Scientific American (December, 1877) deliberately magicoalized the apparatus as if it were animated by a little human inside it. This make-believe is a curious form of self-mockery. For on one hand it expresses clumsy but genuine admiration for the mystery of sound reproduction, an admiration that extols the technology and, given the enchantment of its achievement, strives to find a language of spirit and magic to express that enchantment. On the other hand such magicoalization is an attempt to gain mastery over technology’s mastery of the mimetic faculty itself:

Mr. Thomas A. Edison recently came into this office, placed a little machine on our desk, turned a crank, and the machine inquired as to our health, and asked how we liked the phonograph, informed us that it was very well, and bid us a cordial good night.°

This is not unsimilar to the performance of magic Marsh attempted in the jungle with the talking machine decades later. Roland Gelatt describes crowds listening with “astonished incredulity” to the phonograph’s raucous croak” (the reproductive fidelity was abysmally bad) and emphasizes that it provided the occasion—as with Marsh in the Darién forest—for great spectacles:

As a show property the phonograph won immediate success. To audiences throughout the country it provided an evening’s entertainment always fascinating and usually diverting. It would talk in English, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, and Hebrew. It would imitate the barking of dogs and the crowing of cocks. It could be made to catch colds and cough and sneeze “so believably that physicians in the audience would instinctively begin to write prescriptions.”

A single exhibition phonograph, so it is said, could in 1878 thus earn $1800 a week, and again we witness the self-conscious effort at make-believe, notably with the physicians’ reaction to the reproduced sneeze. In Europe the fascination with the “talking machine” was no less intense. In 1894 just outside of Paris, the Pathé brothers (later famous in the moving picture industry) founded their factory to make cheap talking machines modeled closely on “The Eagle Graphophone,” and in the same year began making cylinders with sound engraved on them. By 1899 there were 1500 sound-cylinder titles to choose from. They called their graphophone “Le Coq,” and so popular did this “Cock” machine become that the “swaggering bird”—as Roland Gelatt defines it—became the Pathé brothers’ trademark. It can be still seen and heard, he wrote (in 1954), at the beginning of Pathé newsreels.

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As with the dog of His Master's Voice, this trademark registers not only (Gallic) nationalism, as does the (American) eagle, but the link between mimesis, primitivism, and technological development. It is the task of the animal to register the rediscovery of the naturalness of the mimetic faculty in a technical age—confirming Walter Benjamin's insight regarding the rebirth of the mimetic with mechanical reproduction. When the great Thomas Edison, credited with the invention of

"talking machine"—and here we cannot easily bypass the obvious mimesis, the animism, built into the concept in the popular name of the apparatus from the start—first heard in 1877 his voice played back to him singing "Mary Had A Little Lamb," he is reported as saying, "I was never so taken aback in my life."13 "Taken aback" is a significant choice of words for this historic moment, a spontaneously fitting way of expressing (what Adorno called) the "shudder of mimesis" being taken back to childhood, back to primitivism. And let's not forget the invocation here of animals as well as of girl children, of the little lamb as well as little Mary, reminiscent of the "talking dog" adorning Marsh's victrolas and records, and said to be the most successful logo in the history of advertising. For a deep chord has been struck here by early twentieth-century advertising and popular culture, substantiating the primitivism that Darwin connected to miming prowess on the beach of the Land of Fire:

They could repeat with perfect correctness each word in any sentence we addressed them, and they remembered such words for some time.
His Master's Voice

Given the Ur-history of the phonograph in the discovery and recovery of Primitive peoples the world over, the way it has itself to be recorded as having "been there," recording and playing, and given the militant role of the victrola in Marsh's expedition, let alone in the causation of the 1925 Cuna uprising, it is devastatingly appropriate that one of the most popular designs made by Cuna women for the appliquéd mola blouses they have made and worn since the late nineteenth century, and which they have sold internationally since the mid-twentieth century, is the logo of RCA Victor, "His Master's Voice." From the viewpoint of modern Western culture—a culture that turns out to be richly endowed with the products of commercial imaginings—this is no ordinary logo.

It is stated in histories of the phonograph that His Master's Voice logo is "generally considered the most valuable trademark in existence." It is surely of interest that a little picture considered in its day to be rather lacking in artistic merit should be the hottest of commercial properties. This can make us appreciate images central to our time in new ways, akin to an older love and beauty magic now destined to spirit money from our pockets, artful spells of mimetic sentence. "What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt."4

Many people are fond of this Victor Talking Machine Company's "talking dog" logo, not least William Barry Owen, who bought the

Fidelity and The Power to Summon

I think that the power of this world-class logo lies in the way it exploits the alleged primitivism of the mimetic faculty. Everything, of course, turns on the double meaning of fidelity (being accurate and being loyal), and on what is considered to be a mimetically astute being—in this case not Darwin's Fuegians but a dog. Blessed with that famous "sixth sense" this creature, like the Primitive, possesses a formidable mimetic faculty, the basis for judging similitude.

This logo, then, can be thought of as displaying a mimetic superpower in action, the mimetically capacious dog straining itself pleasurably to distinguish copy from original as it comes through the ear-trumpet of the phonograph. But this logo is also internally referential, an image of the miming of miming, and in this regard it is pertinent to invoke a history of pictures used to embellish music-boxes—as presented in A. Buchner's work on eighteenth-century automata or androids, miracles of technical ingenuity imitating the movements of living creatures. Except for a drummer-boy and a clown, the living creatures thus mimicked, faithfully playing their faithfully reproduced sound, turn out on inspection of Buchner's display to be everything but the white male. There are negroes in top hats and tight breeches, the "upsidedown world clock" with a monkey playing the drum, "the dance of the hotten-tots," a duck drinking water, quacking, eating grain, and defecating, birds in cages, birds on snuff boxes, and women—
especially women. The oldest puppet that Buchner describes is from a so-called Renaissance grotto in St.-Germain en Lay, a figure known as Cecilia, who played the organ as a mechanism hidden inside her body made her fingers press the keys while her feet pumped the pedals. The skilled automaton-making team of Jacquet-Droz, father and son, were famous for their Young Writer and Clavecín Player. The Writer is a young girl seated writing a letter of some fifty words at a desk. The Clavecín Player as described by Dr. Buchner is a charming young woman playing an organ-like instrument. Her torso, head, eyes, chest, shoulders, hands, and fingers are worked by a complex of levers, one of which produces the effect of breathing, the bosom rising and falling, the eyes moving so that she appears to be looking now at her hands, then at the audience. In short intervals between the pieces she continues breathing and moves her head, dropping her eyes as if shy. "The illusion of a living creature," observes Buchner, "is thus complete."

Jacquet Droz, père (1721–1790), was invited to Madrid by the King of Spain where his automata nearly cost him his life. The Inquisition accused him of sorcery, reminding us of Horkheimer and Adorno's theses that civilization (meaning Western civilization—the civilization of Capital) has replaced "mimetic behavior proper by organized control of mimesis":

Uncontrolled mimesis is outlawed. The angel with the fiery sword who drove man out of paradise and onto the path of technical progress is the very symbol of that progress. For centuries, the severity with which the rulers prevented their own followers and the subjugated masses from
Mark of the mimetic: The Clavecin player (automaton).

Mark of the mimetic: Marie Antoinette’s girl playing a dulcimer (automaton).
Mark of the mimetic: The minstrel (automaton).

Mark of the mimetic: Isis (automaton).

...nerting to mimetic modes of existence, starting with the religious prohibition on images, going on to the social banishment of actors and gypsies, and leading finally to the kind of teaching which does not allow children to behave as children, has been the condition for civilization.

On the other hand, controlled mimesis is an essential component of socialization and discipline, and in our era of world history, in which colonialism has played a dominant role, mimesis is of a piece with primitivism. The last automaton was made in the twentieth century by an American, Cecil Nixon. It is called Isis—a bare-breasted, dark-skinned woman playing a zither while reclining on a couch decorated
with leopard skins, hieroglyphs, and "other Egyptian motifs." It took twelve years to construct and has a mechanism of 1187 wheels and 2233 other parts. It is said to have caused a sensation in film studios and was shown in many American towns. When the temperature rose above 80 deg F Isis moved her veil until the temperature fell.  

The Talking Dog, Fingerprinting, and Sorcery

Together with her near-nakedness this unveiling of Isis reminds us of the heat in those torrid zones where the mimetic flourishes. It also reminds us of the heat of the senses and thus brings to the fore two interwoven meanings of the mimetic—imitation and sensuousness—that, partly through Horkheimer and Adorno, I have been at pains to elucidate throughout this book. These two dimensions of imitation and sensuousness match Frazer's classic distinction of "sympathetic magic" into "imitative" and "contagious" principles. Like police fingerprinting as well as the use of footprints in sorcery, His Master's Voice's Talking Dog not only draws upon sympathy and contagion but fuses them. Through contact (contagion) the finger makes the print (a copy). But the print is not only a copy. It is also testimony to the fact that contact was made—and it is the combination of both facts that is essential to the use of fingerprinting by the police in detection and by the State in certifying identities. The Talking Dog also intermixes contagion with sympathy, the sensuous with imitation, because it is on account of its sensorium, allegedly sensitive to an uncanny degree, that it can accurately register—i.e. receive the print—and distinguish faithful from unfaithful copies. Here Horkheimer and Adorno's Marxist inflection of Nietzsche's view of civilization, turning the animal in man against itself, receives its due, the dog now being the civilized man's servant in the detection, and hence selling, of good copy. With the transformation from the sorcerer's practice combining imitation and contact in the use of the footprint to that of fingerprinting (and use of the camera) by the State in the late nineteenth century, this "organized control of mimesis" has reached an unmatched level of perfection, truly the modernist rebirth of the mimetic faculty.
Mimesis and Alterity

Title page of Galton's book, Finger Prints

It should be noted that fingerprinting as modern State practice owes everything to modern colonialism, beginning with the use of the sign manuals of "finger-marks" by mid-nineteenth century British colonial administration in India so as to prevent people from impersonating pensioners after their deaths. In this history we encounter striking contradictions and collusion of mimesis and alterity across the colonial divide; a colonial administration dependent on writing and signatures in a largely illiterate colonial society; administrators' fear of massive fraud by means of false signatures; British administrators unable to discern unique facial and other identifying qualities among the masses of their Indian subjects ("they all look the same"); and last but not least, the decisive ingredient in the discovery of fingerprinting, the use of the hand and thumb as a type of modernizing sorcery by the colonial bureaucracy.

It was this last feature which led to the discovery of the "scientific" value of fingerprinting. According to Charles Darwin's cousin the esteemed Sir Francis Galton, F.R.S., etc., and author in 1892 of Finger Prints, the text that established a system for the use of fingerprinting in State surveillance, Sir William Herschel informed him that because "it was so hard to obtain credence to the signatures of the natives, that he thought he would use the signature of the hand itself, chiefly with the intention of frightening the man who made it from afterwards denying his formal act" (emphasis added). And no doubt the heady mixture of science, racism, State bureaucratic theatrics, and attributions of native superstition involved was intimately connected to sub-continental notions, British as well as Asian, concerning the "magic" of both copy and contact.10

There are still further mimetic features to consider with the logo of the Talking Dog/His Master's Voice, features wherein analogy and modeling fuse with the quite different principles of mechanical cause and effect (indexical signs). The blossoming ear-trumpet of the phonograph, almost as large as the dog, is a mimetic modeling of ear-function as well as of voice-throwing, as with a bull-horn (note the appellation). Hidden in the technology of the talking machine are the hills and dales of the grooves of the disc. These physical indentations correspond for mimeticizing point with the sound recorded and then played back. Finally there is the curious mimetic gesture of the dog, its body as well as its face miming the human notion of quizzicality. This dog is less for fidelity and is also a little mystified. What could be more "human" (or at least anthropomorphic) than this "talking dog"? This is one of the great faces, like Garbo's, of the twentieth century.

The Animal in the Machine

Where politics most directly enters is in the image's attempt to combine fidelity of mimetic reproduction with fidelity to His Master's Voice,
the hound like a dutiful servant being credited with precisely this artful combination. But in this logo it is also possible to discern a continuous and indecisive struggle between technology and magic, indicating co-dependence. For on the one hand the animal is what assures the fidelity of technical reproduction. But on the other, the dog not only looks quizzical but is in fact being fooled, for there is no real master, just the copy of the master’s voice. The technology of reproduction triumphs over the dog but needs the dog’s validation.

An oddly undisconcerting moment arises with the fact that the logo is generally referred to not as the listening dog but as “the talking dog.” Quite apart from the fact that this goes against the original intention of the artist, Francis Carro, who was moved in the 1890s (so he said to have said) to paint his dead brother’s dog Nipper on account of the quizzical expression on the dog’s face when listening to a voice on an Edison phonograph (the dog’s dead master’s voice?), this of course cannot be a talking dog, as talk is something reserved for humans and the machines of the Victor Talking Machine Company.

Cuna mola: RCA Victor’s “Talking Dog” (from Parker and Neal, 1977).

To refer to this as “the talking dog” is not only to reverse the talking machine from a player into a recorder, or to see the dog as entering into a conversation with the player, but also to magically endow—with effortless ease—the hound with the human faculties of the talking machine. It would seem that this transformation of the animal into the human, however, can only come from the machine itself, the machinery of sound-mimesis. The setting up of the contrast between (the then new) technology and the animal, between the machine and the primitive, has the curious result of moving the primitive into the machine to wrest the mimetic faculty from a bunch of wires and grooves. And this is precisely what the Cuna mola shows us, “minions in attendance.” write two commentators, “busily employed keeping the phonograph functioning for the big dog’s pleasure.”

This Cuna dog is certainly cute, even cuter than the original reproduced in a near-infinity of copies. I do not know if the dog is pleased, but what to me is beyond doubt is the intense pleasure—the catching of the breath, the delighted laugh, the stirring of curiosity—that this particular mola brings to Western viewers today, including myself, all the more so when held side by side with its Western original.
MIMESIS AND ALTERITY

This Sudden Laugh From Nowhere

Why this laugh? Surely this is what I call Aristotle’s pleasure, the (not so) simple fact that observing mimesis is pleasurable. And just as surely there is an element of colonialist mastery in this laughter; the very word ‘cute’ is as suggestive as my having belabored to show throughout this book how difficult it is to pry mimesis loose from pervasive intimations of primitiveness. But there is also the possibility that this sudden laugh from nowhere registers a tremor in cultural identity, and not only in identity but in the security of Being itself. This is like Bataille’s laugh; a sensuous explosion of smooth muscle composing Being in the same instant as it extinguishes it. This is Benjamin’s flash, as when he writes that there is something peculiar about similarity: “Its perception is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash. It slips past, can possibly be regained, but really cannot be held fast, unlike other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and as transitorily as a constellation of stars.”

The West On The Chest

The ethnography tells us that while Cuna men carve curing figures with Western exteriors and monopolize communication with spints, Cuna women are meant to be seen but not heard in public space, serving as the ocular signifier supreme of Cuna Being, shrouded in the mysterious magnificence of their molas where the Western gaze and the Cuna presentation interlock.

While it is pointed out that the art of mola-making probably derives from the long-established but now defunct art of body-painting, it women of men as much as of women, we now need to emphasize that this body-painting is displaced in significant ways; first onto women’s bodies, the men now garbed in Western gear; second, the women, the visual signifiers of Cuna Being, often wear on their chests no longer only abstract designs or flowers and animals, but the West—as indicated by their version of the Talking Dog and other consumer commodities, advertisements, trademarks, and icons of popular culture (long before this became a fashion on First World T-shirts). Since U.S.-mediated goods have passed into Cuna purview by means of Cuna men working in the Canal Zone since the 1930s, thanks to their convivial relationship
Mimesis and Alterity

Edison's first sketch of the phonograph.

with the United States, the chests (and backs) of the women have formed a species of trade catalog—and here we might do well to remember Baron Nordenskiöld's and Rubén Pérez's references in the 1930s to a Cuna heaven stuffed with Western commodities, in which case we would also want to attend to healers burning illustrations torn from trade catalogs to release their spirits as part of the cure for snakebite and other community-threatening perils.

Yet if Western goods excite the Indians' imagination, how much more does such excitation excite the Western observer! It seems clear that one of the things that most turns on Western observers about molas is the operation molas perform on the image of the West, in particular on the West in its commodity-expression. Concerning their first exposure to molas some time in the mid-1950s, at an exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum's Folk Art Shop, Ann Parker and Avon Neal first single out the abstract features of design and color, the skill of the stitching, and then the

... amusing content—the fresh wit and humor that belied the naive presentation. Mixed in with dazzling abstract patterns were images right off Madison Avenue... only better.

Two designs from that first show were especially memorable, a beautiful "His Master's Voice" trademark and a whiskey bottle, its colorful label meticulously duplicated right down to the smallest lettering in fine needlework. There was also a Kools cigarette ad, a primitive airplane, a poster playing a guitar, several familiar cartoon characters, plus wonderfully conceived flora and fauna. It was a feast for eyes too long battered by the crass visual assaults of modern advertising.14

This importance of advertising is again signaled when Parker and Neal go on to state that "molas have been collected and admired for many different reasons, but examples based on the advertising world's photogaphic symbols are the ones that have amazed and delighted many of the most sophisticated collectors."15

In vain these authors try to account for such delighted amazement. "Acculturation molas could be considered the great contemporary copy in," they write. "When the designs are looked at side by side with their sources, the magic of Cuna interpretation can be appreciated." But when it comes to thinking through in what this "magic"—this Cuna magic—of interpretation consists, the authors fall back on (a moralistic) formalism: "Unpleasing details are eliminated and something new is always added to support or enhance the design, and shapes are shortened, widened, repeated, patterned, and embellished in dozens of different ways."16

Formal considerations alone dictate other observations, such as the illuminating, eye-scattering effect of the colored vertical rays (and sometimes tiny triangles) that fill up all available space on the molas. The entire surface of the Talking Dog mola from which I am working thus covered. This vastly complicates the central image and, as with
seventeenth-century Baroque poetics, let alone certain forms of advertising, one has to work to “get it.” This is clear when you compare RCA Victor’s Talking Dog with the mola example. The painter of the RCA dog—an acknowledged late-nineteenth century British Realist—has striven to render what in his eyes would be considered a starkly straightforward, albeit sentimental photographic image. The sheer blackness of the large background not only serves to highlight the centrality of the image, but contrasts most emphatically with the mola background, which does the exact opposite, running into the central image, displacing its centrality in such a riot of marginalia that the eye finds it hard to stay still, to still the image itself. RCA Victor’s Talking Dog is frozen in a petrified gesture whereas this Cuna woman’s dog is ready to talk. The blackness centralizing the petrified image has been irradiated by countless rays of bewildering color amounting to a “profane illumination.”

This takes us beyond form to consider the spectral quality of the advertisements portrayed—their quality as source-objects “belonging” as commodity-representations to the cultural orbit of the United States (even if they are in fact manufactured in Taiwan or Japan or Brazil) and their quality as copies sewn by Indian women on a humid Caribbean Island. In a penetrating aside, Parker and Neal say the whole idea of such molas “is like a great spoon of our own mass-production advertising-oriented society.” Yet surely what becomes if not “magical,” at least strangely powerful here, is not so much the Cuan “mass of interpretation” as invested in the mola copy, but the magic of the commodity-image itself—of the original of which the Cuna mola is copy. Indeed, what underpins the entire descriptive and assimilative effort of Western observers like Parker and Neal is their feeling that these molas bring out something indefinable, something powerful and refreshing. But what is this indefinable yet refreshing power brought out of the commodity-image, and how is this achieved?

Recently Outdated

Primitives make mighty mimics; thus the young Darwin in 1832, observing gaits and tongues and faces back and forth across the beach,
The Surrealists perceived an “atmosphere” concealed in these recently outmoded things. They based their (would-be revolutionary) art on bringing this “atmosphere” to the point of explosion, creating a “profane illumination,” to which Benjamin referred as a “materialistic, anthropological inspiration.”

Is not the commodity-display in the Cuna molas precisely a Third World flea-market for the First World, displaying the “recently outmoded”? Is not the effect of amazement, delight, and fear for the eyes, noted by Parker and Neal, testimony to the profane illumination that flashes out with the release of “atmosphere” concealed therein?

But what is this “atmosphere” and how is it released? To a certain extent it is created by the way the Third World and its objects are in a global perspective generally seen as permanently “recently outdated,” a reservoir of First World hand-me-downs and sleepy-eyed memories of its earlier consumer items. Defined in advance as backward and always lagging behind, Third Worlds are exemplary of the recently outdated, and Cuna molas constitute no exception. This character of being permanently out of date, moreover, applies not only to things actually made in the Third World, but with greater force to the objects imported and preserved over time—the 1930s and 1940s cars, the 1950s telephone systems, the prewar Singer sewing machines, the mechanical typewriters, and a thousand and one more such relics of modernity preserved in the time-warp of permanent underdevelopment and poverty, not to mention the dumping of First World waste, toxics, cigarette ads, and technologies found to be harmful, like DDT crop-spraying.

The RCA Victor Phonograph occupies a privileged position in the time-warp, for it is a knock-out instance of the recently outmoded and the power thereof, a gorgeous billowing forth of superseded promise. It is one of the great signs of the recently outmoded, shrouded in a mysterious atmosphere. This atmosphere is testimony to the Surrealist insight regarding the power of the ghosts embedded in the commodities created by yesteryear’s technology—the whole point of modernity and capitalist competition being that technology and manufactured products are made obsolescent by progress’ forward march.

Obsolescence is where the future meets the past in the dying body of the commodity. Because history requires a medium for its reckoning, a temporal landscape of substance and things in which the meaning of events no less than the passage of time is recorded, in modern times it is the commodity that embodies just such a ready reckoning of the objectification of the pathos of novelty.

The commodity does more than yield the measure of history as time. It is also the petrified historical event where nature passed into culture, where raw material combined with human labor and technology to newly cultured design. Standing thus at the crossroad of past and present, nature and culture, and submerging birth in death, the commodity is hardly a sign or symbol. Only in religion and magic can we find equivalent economies of meaning and practices of expenditure in which an object, be it a commodity or a fetish, spills over its referent and suffuses its component parts with ineffable radiance.

The commodity is a theater of operations in which honest labors have stunning metaphysical effects. The commodity is both the reformer and the performance of the naturalization of history, no less than the historicization of nature.

In other words, the commodity is the staging of “second nature”—as unmaking no less than its making.

This has profound implications for the mimetic faculty, which I have defined as the nature that culture uses to create second nature. For if the “magic” brought out by the “recently outdated” is a magic achieved by framing, by highlighting the staging of second nature, its unmaking no less than its making, then this is also likely to be a privileged site for the revelation of mimesis and the flooding of mimetic excess—nowhere more so than in that reflection of the West forged by the handicraft of Third and Fourth World women on the global stage of primitivism.

Fortifying the Fetish: Magic and Necromancy in the Creation of Profane Illumination

Fashion is the realm in which the obsolescent character of the commodity is nourished and ritualized. In its tensed articulation of future and
past, fashion heralds birth and death. This is one reason why the commodity is endowed with a spectral quality. In his famous text on the fetishism of commodities, Karl Marx stated that all the “magic and necromancy” of the commodity is dissipated if we turn our gaze to noncapitalist societies, where production was not dictated by the free market and hence the commodity form. But in societies on the margin of capitalist industry or capitalist culture and profoundly influenced by that culture, and where strong local traditions of magic exist as well, then the magic and necromancy of the commodity is not so much dissipated as fortified.

Baron Nordenskiöld’s and Rubén Pérez’ 1938 Cuna ethnography well displays this where they speak of the Cuna land of the dead as a world stuffed full of the souls of white man’s commodities, which the Indians shall inherit—when dead (as I have described in Chapter 10). Forbidden access to the sacred, the province of men, Cuna women can be understood as inscribing this heavenly image-land of the dead onto their chests in the form of living molas such as the “talking dog.” Hence in their busy hands the sacred illumination, reserved for men, becomes a profane illumination.

In trying to convey the Surrealist trick (and Benjamin insists it is a trick, not a method) by which the “atmosphere” of recently outmoded things is to be released, a trick that “substitutes a political for a historical view,” Benjamin quotes a passage attributed to Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) that is worth reading slowly so as to absorb its atmosphere:

Open, graves, you, the dead of the picture galleries, corpses behind screens, in palaces, castles, and monasteries, here stands the fabulous keeper of keys holding a bunch of keys to all times, who knows where to press the most artful locks and invites you to step into the midst of the world of today, to mingle with the bearers of burdens, the mechanics whom money ennobles, to make yourself at home in their automobiles, which are beautiful as armor from the age of chivalry, to take your places in the international sleeping cars, and to weld yourself to all the people who today are still proud of their privileges. But civilization will give them short shrift.20

Are not these keys the Surrealists’ equivalent to the Cuna healer’s practice of burning illustrations taken from trade catalogs so as to release their souls, a practice paralleled not so much by Cuna women making their molas, but by the burning Western gaze upon them?