

Modern Monsters / Death and Life of Fiction

HISTORY
AS
SORCERY
(EXCERPT)



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Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Origin of German Tragic Drama”

It is not with conscious ideology but with what I call “implicit social knowledge” that I am here concerned, with what moves people without their knowing quite why or how, with what makes the real real and the normal normal, and above all with what makes ethical distinctions politically powerful. I take implicit social knowledge to be essentially inarticulable and imageric, nondiscursive knowing of social relationality, and in trying to understand some aspects of the way that history and memory interact in the constituting of this knowledge, I wish to raise some questions about the way that certain historical events, indeed notably political events of conquest and colonization, become objectified in contemporary shamanic repertoire as magically empowered imagery capable of causing and relieving misfortune.¹

I do not mean to here imply that a simple, or what some would call an historicist-conceived time sequence of cause and effect is at work; that first the Great Events of the European conquest of the New World fix images in popular tradition that surface much later on, in our own day, for instance, in shamanic healing rites. Rather, it seems to me that there is a far more interesting and complicated fit between the rendering of the past in the present than this causally sequential model assumes, and that this fit is one of appropriateness of meaning and feeling. Surely the use of magically empowering imagery drawn from and referring to the past can teach us something important about just this fit and why it is so appropriate.

1 Since several years the author has been engaged in writing a local history of colonialism, shamanism, and the wild man, based to a large extent on his living with and learning from shamans and their patients in the Upper Amazon-Andean foothills of the Putumayo River in southwest Colombia, South America, a region he first visited in 1972. Since then he has returned every year except 1973. A grant from the National Science Foundation made it possible to spend much of 1975 and 1976 there, and the National Endowment for the Humanities provided a year in 1980 for the preparation of a book about the embodying of colonialism in medicinal magic. A comprehensive but abbreviated account of this material has been published by the author: “Folk Healing and the Structure of Conquest in Southwest Colombia,” *Journal of Latin American Lore* 6:2 (1980), 217–78.

In her analysis of the re-surfacing of witch mythology in contemporary European feminism, Silvia Bovenschen argues that the resurgence of this image illustrates not so much the historian's knowledge of witches and their persecution, but instead a more direct "preconceptual" relationship between the image of the witch and the personal experiences of today's women.² She points out that this sort of experiential appropriation of the past differs from the professional historian's assumed *modus operandi* in that it incorporates historical and social fantasy sensitive to the underground existence of forbidden images. In turning to such images, people are reflecting on their symbolic potential to fulfill hopes for release from suffering. Related to this is the proposition that the blocking of experience by political oppression and psychic repression can entail a subsequent process whereby that experience becomes unblocked, animated and conscious, by means of myths and mythic images. I wish to suggest that this process is also involved in the European conquest of "primitive" societies and in the colonial decomposing of their religions. The "bits and pieces" that remain of these religions are thus not testimony to the tenacity of tradition, as the historicist would argue. Instead they are mythic images reflecting and condensing the experiential appropriation of the history of conquest, as that history is seen to form analogies and structural correspondences with the hopes and tribulations of the present. In noting that this sort of appropriation of the past is anarchical and rebellious in its rejection of chronology and historical accuracy, Bovenschen stresses its redemptive function, citing Walter Benjamin: "The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one."³

Yet surely this secret agreement, despite its Messianic promise, is also subject to conflict. Indeed Benjamin finds in such conflict favored terrain for revolutionary praxis because (as in his "Theses on

2 Silvia Bovenschen, "The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature," *New German Critique* 15 (Fall, 1978), 83–119; p. 84.

3 Bovenschen, "The Contemporary Witch ..." 84.

the Philosophy of History”) he believes that it is where history figures in memory, in an image that flashes forth unexpectedly in a moment of crisis, that contending political forces engage in battle.

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.⁴

Provocatively probing into hitherto little-explored zones of political control, Benjamin was also urging fellow Marxists to ponder more deeply their own implicit faith in a Messianic view of history, to face up to that faith in a conscious fashion, and to consider for their activism the power of social experience, imagery, and mood, in constructing and deconstructing political consciousness and the will to act politically. Another way of putting this is to point out that he didn’t place much faith in facts and information in winning arguments, let alone class struggle, and that it was in the less conscious image-realm and in the dream-world of the popular imagination that he saw it necessary to act. “To convince is to conquer without conception;” he wrote. And if the Fascists were willing and remarkably able to exploit these dreams, that did not mean that myth and fantasy were necessarily reactionary. Totally to the contrary, the Left had abandoned this terrain where the

4 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn and ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), 255.

battle had to be fought and whose images contained the revolutionary seeds which the soil ploughed by Marxist dialectics could nourish and germinate.

What he advocated was a sort of surrealist technique using what he called “dialectical images”—an obscure yet compelling notion better left to example than to exegesis; what his friend Theodor Adorno referred to as “picture puzzles which shock by way of their enigmatic form and thereby set thinking in motion.” Picture-puzzles is of course how Freud referred to the manifest content of dream imagery, and if it was to the manifest and not the latent level that Benjamin was drawn, it was because of the way such images defamiliarized the familiar and shook the sense of reality in the given order of things, redeeming the past in the present in a medley of deconstructive anarchical ploys. Unlike current modes of Deconstruction however, the intent here was to facilitate the construction of new forms of social life from the glimpses provided of alternative futures when otherwise concealed or forgotten connections with the past were revealed by the juxtaposition of images, as in the technique of montage—a technique of great importance to Benjamin. Indeed Stanley Mitchell tells us that “Benjamin came to regard montage, i.e. the ability to capture the infinite, sudden, or subterranean connections of dissimilars, as the major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology.”⁵

The understanding we are led to is that the “dialectical image” is in *itself a montage*, both capturing the aforementioned connections between dissimilars and also that which is thereby captured.

From the examples Benjamin presents, as in his “One Way Street” we can see that such images are created by the author but are also already formed, or half-formed, so to speak, latent in the world of the popular imagination, awaiting the fine touch of the dialectical imagician’s wand—not unlike Victor Turner’s description of the central African herbalist and curer whose adze, in chopping bark off the chosen tree, arouses the slumbering power of material already there awaiting the copula of the magician’s touch.

5 Stanley Mitchell, “Introduction,” in *Understanding Brecht: Walter Benjamin*, trans. Anna Bostock (New York, 1983), p. xiii.

This notion of the activist acting on something ready to be activated is well conveyed where Benjamin writes that “Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social existence what oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour oil over it; one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints that one has to know.”⁶

But how does one know?

6 Benjamin, “One Way Street,” in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London, 1979), 45.