CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Arresting Images

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> Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock.
>
> —Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

Opening Things

Arresting images are a modern habit born out of the surge of signs, capital, and the sensoriums of public culture surge through circuits of image and matter. Lodged in the senses, and carrying the aesthetic charge of the senses, they are states of suspense filled with resonance.[1] Like a hunter tracking his way, or prey, they sniff out tracks in the networks of the new global order to mark moments of impact and reenchantment when circulating things suddenly enter the senses and literally make sense. Seducing and repelling us with the look and smell of an incipient vitality, they figure the immanent intensity or force of what Deleuze calls affect, or the two-sidedness of things where the virtual meets the actual and where what matters is the seeping edge of potentiality itself.[2] Felt as a sudden eruption or interruption, this shimmering transformation of matter and image into a common sensate affect can come as a shock. But it is also a constant in the continuous trembling that haunts the stable gaze and in the proliferation of images and sensibilities that constantly exceed the requirements of what we call reason, order, and "common sense."[3]

Affect is the promise, or threat, that something is happening—something new, emergent, and capable of impact. It may be half noted out of

the corner of the eye or sensed as a figure shadowing the commonsense world. Or it can be put into words as that which escapes or exceeds enclosure and stasis to become a figure of vitality and even freedom.[4] But whether it haunts or is courted as a welcome reprieve from symbolic gridlock, affect gathers its force to make image touch matter by moving through the senses. It becomes the medium of the senses' contact and copy, and its power is the power of synaesthesia. It is precisely not the collection of named "feelings" or "emotions" invented in discourses of morals, ideals, and known subjectivities but something else that forms their raw material and exceeds them. It is more precisely and literally captured as the sudden and lingering intensity of things that give pause, if only for a minute—sights that hit with a tactile force and sounds that surge through the stomach.[5] Circulations in moments of vital impact.

Arresting Images

I remember childhood as a collection of arresting images that hinge on sensory details and open onto luminous scenes of affect: my kindergarten class walking back from Woolworth's carrying a box full of furry yellow chicks, the warming spring sun on our backs; the smell of shimmering red tulips in my mother's garden married to the taste of found raspberries and tart rhubarb ripped out of the ground while she wasn't looking and eaten with a spoonful of dirt. My mother dressing to go out in a beautiful black dress and red lipstick cuts to the brilliant red blood that exploded from the face of the boy next door as he fell from a cliff and landed face down on the cement in front of me, and then to the rhythm of shocks, days later, as my father and the other men tore the cliff apart boulder by boulder and each giant rock hit the ground, and shook the glasses in the kitchen cabinet of the quiet, shaded pantry with an impact that seemed transformative. I remember a spectral scene of my little brother hunched over in the pine trees that hugged the house and then, walking back from school a few hours later, the sight of the house engulfed in flames and the driveway full of fire trucks with flashing red lights and ear-piercing sirens. The phrase "playing with matches" seems to be written across the blue sky. Or there was the day when my grandparents—all four of them—came to visit from out of state and they were floating up the treacherous driveway in a big wide car as I stood on the side and watched. Then the right wheels were sliding off the icy edge and the big car hung suspended over the cliff. The white heads in

the backseat sat very still while I ran, yelling for my father. Or there was that tense moment when my sister crushed her fingers in the milk delivery door at the top of the cellar stairs and she was screaming, drawing my mother to the spurting blood, while the wild rabbits we had captured that morning ran around the cellar in a secret chaos. Sunday drives were ice cream cones dripping down our fingers as we sat crowded into the backseat, a complex order of silent conspiracies, betrayals, and realignments as the youngest were wordlessly defrauded of their ice cream without setting off the alarm that would alert the front seat. I remember this latter as a scene of sticky fingers and huge, silent tears running down fat baby cheeks. There were strange, jarring performances like the one at the VFW hall where my sister was the "can-can" girl covered in clanking cans and I was the "balloon girl" dancing in floating plastic spheres to the song about "the itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, yellow polka-dot bikini" while everyone laughed.

Arresting images interrupt the run-on story of everyday life with an aesthetic sensibility that literally articulates, or "makes matter," the Event itself—the moment of recognition that changes the nature of recognition, or the encounter that erupts out of the order of representations we use to lay claim to a self, or an era, or a cultural politics. The moment of shock—the Event made sensate—erupts as a shadow suddenly revealed skirting the order of ideal representations of things like family, church, and law. So, for instance, my early Catholic school years are literally articulated in screen memories of sensate excess and shock: my little brother scared to the point of vomiting every day on our walk to school, the big leather strap in the back of the room, the ruler coming down on knuckles, the voice of the priest behind the dark confessional curtain asking if I had ever been impure (and was it alone or with others?), the bishop's giant ruby ring as he slapped my face at the altar of my confirmation. I know Family as a viscerality through screen images of walking through neighborhoods with my mother as night fell, peering together into picture windows to catch a glimpse of a lamp by a reading chair or a shelf of knickknacks on the wall as still lifes of modernity at rest. Or Saturday mornings spent sitting around my grandmother's table while she and my mother and all of my aunts told graphic stories under the guise of keeping track of a massive kinship network when the simple effort to recall married names systematically would key the sudden, repetitive eruption of images of alcoholism, accidents, violence, cancers, and other

disastrous ends. Or there is the scene of my father trying to hand-feed me all through my life as if he were a bird dropping food into the open mouth of his young. Or the shocking moments of his helpless panic, like the dark, bitter-cold morning he crawled on his old hands and knees up the steep icy driveway in a desperate effort to get me to the airport on time.

The technologies of family, church, law, and nation lay confident claim to affect as a capturable content of known and expected "feelings,"[6] but affect itself—that which surges into view along the jumpy border of the actual and the virtual—is their raw material and their only renewable resource. Alphonso Lingis describes an encounter with the jumpy move of affect one day when he was visiting a mine on the Arctic Circle:

> The young miner who showed me the mine put out every cigarette he smoked on his hand, which was covered with scar tissue. Then I saw the other young miners all had the backs of their hands covered with scar tissue.... when my eye fell on them it flinched, seeing the burning cigarette being crushed and sensing the pain.... The eye does not read the meaning in a sign; it *jumps* from the mark to the pain and the burning cigarette, and then jumps to the fraternity signaled by the burning cigarettes.[7]

Circulation and Impact

The arresting images of everyday life are innumerable, and they are at once vastly familiar and entirely uncharted, roosting here and there in strange and ordinary moments of impact and emergent affect. At odd moments of spacing out, a strange malaise may come over you. Something tempts a shift in perspective—a sidestep that brings an uncanny, alien presence into the field of vision.[8] An object insists on being seen. Whether through the tricks of trauma or the seductions of compulsive beauty,[9] something captivates you in a field of reciprocal gazes that can not be reduced to the subject's superior one-point perspective. It provokes what Lyotard calls "the extinction of... the subject's mirror... of its most elementary capacity for synthesis" and opens instead to the circuitry of circulation and impact, matter shifting into image shifting into matter.[10] This is not necessarily a bad thing. It's not a good thing either. But it is, necessarily, an aesthetic event of the senses.

These days, spectacular graphics of disaster, monstrosity, and strangeness literally "bring to light" the mass subject and the very notion of a

"public."[11] The airwaves are filled with images of the man who bursts into his ex-girlfriend's trailer, shooting her and her new lover in their bed, or the "educated couple" who calmly go away on vacation, leaving behind a hundred cats—some dead, some alive, wild ones living in the walls. On the nightly news we see the arrested image of the trailer wrapped in crime scene tape and the cat cages and cans of unopened cat food all over the house.

Reality TV gives us still lifes of the poor and outcast or the rich and famous. And then car ads break in. The big shiny object whisks you along a beautiful wilderness road and then sweeps to a quick stop; the camera pans back to ponder the big shiny car in a quiet moment of fantasy realized. In the end, you picture yourself both "in" the car and just where you are, watching, inhabiting the power of the tuned-in spectator.

America's Most Wanted shows photos of bank robbers with and without beards so you can scan the faces at the 7-Eleven for a match. This, of course, is a technology of self-discipline in which the citizenry feeds on its moments of visibility—its moments of failure, of excess "action," of surges into the limelight, and of abjection. But it is also, first, a game in which the viewer mimics the moves of the TV and becomes an active participant in its logic of image production and recognition. The seduction, it seems to me, is not in a catharsis of mean-spirited, festering alienation but in the vitality of the game itself. In the game you can make the connection between the image on the screen and the walking simulacrum of social life that is the trip to the 7-Eleven.

Some people make the trip to the 7-Eleven several times a day, expending energy in excess of the weekly shop to the supermarket grid. They go for cigarettes and beer and bad food and lottery tickets and all those things poor people shouldn't spend their money on. It's irrational. But it keeps them in the loop of the citizen as consumer and performs an action on the loop itself, taking it further into the logic of excess and expenditure, taking that logic itself to the point of excess and visibility and to a point of satisfaction in which a tension is finally spent.

Those people at the 7-Eleven who are on the lookout for the face out of place may be adding a dimension of excitement to their four-trips-a-day habit. Others may be surveiling Otherness from the righteous pose of those just stopping in for the efficiency of a quart of milk midweek. Layers of alienation and the vitality of action/reaction twist in rich and

tense confusion and rub shoulders in sudden impulses of seduction or repulsion.

Mimesis in a State of Shock

When affect makes its jump between the visible thing, the idea, and the social sensibility, it can leave in its wake uncanny connections between otherwise disparate states of arrest, like shock and recluse. Take, for instance, the uncanny resemblance some of us feel between the dazed state of trauma and the enforced cluelessness, or cocooning, we now call "home." In both, a space of heightened affect engulfs the subject in an aesthetic/sensory scene. Affect jumps into view as the shock of an unassimilated trauma, or it drifts dreamily onto center stage in the profoundly secluded space of the bourgeois interior. Either way, sensually charged objects resonate with an absence/presence whether they are hypervisible and charged with excess or held at bay and haunting.

From the perspective of affect, the link between shock and a cushioned recluse is direct, seductive, and mimetic. That is, shock and cocooning are not "opposite emotions"—as we might picture them, for instance, in the image of the traumatized subject who runs home to hide and finds relief—but practices with a deep affinity. Both track the immanence of affect lodged in a scene of arrest. Both are haunted by immanence and both dream of a satisfaction of the senses, or the completion or expenditure of an overwhelming affect. Both states of a jumpy arrest, they stage both the search for an ending and the intensity of immanence itself. The same momentary "satisfaction" of the haunted senses can come at the sight of an accident or at the sight of the perfect cocoon room when you come home at night and close the door behind you. But even as dread comes to a head in a moment of shock it threatens to erupt again; even as the cushioned fantasyland of recluse snaps into place it takes on the jumpy logic of the fetish moving through circuits of repression and return, spectrality and concrete substance.[12] The very act of holing up in your living room produces dread of what is "out there," even to the point where going out itself becomes traumatic. Then the search for the arresting presence is renewed and redoubled.

Think of standing in line in a supermarket. You're already impatient but then you get desperate when something goes wrong with the register and you're stuck there, unable either to go forward or to move to another register. You are caught in a system of circulation but unable to

move. So you pick up a magazine to zone out. You open to the picture-perfect centerfold of a scene at rest in *Country Living* or *Home and Garden* and relax into the invented aura. Or, alternatively, you skim the tabloid headlines for the thrill of shock. This is another way of doing the same thing, of literally "relaxing" the jumpy move of affect. You come back to life, engaged by an object/scene. The tactile image literally satisfies the move of affect to actualize something that is tempting or haunting.

Glamour magazines do this too. They give you not so much a model, or a blueprint, of how to look and what to wear as the magic of affect itself. Models frozen in time and space stare back at you in a scene that stages the jump from fantasy to actual body/image and back. Affect is captured in an affecting presence at rest.[13] The world of sports spectatorship is stuffed to overflowing with this jump of affect.

The arrested image seduces the spectator with the copy that is also contact.[14] In its popular art form—the film—it whispers to us, in an inaudible murmuring, "Love me."[15] And it promises, in return, both the bubble of the living fantasy and the little but profound shocks of recognition and encounter that seem to awaken something. As Taussig has argued, it is the capacity of modernity's mimetic machines to pump out contact-sensuousity that makes Benjamin's "profane illumination" possible.[16] "Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt."[17] An "optical unconscious" born in a commodified world grows sensuously vibrant in the circulating impacts of surround-sound movies, ads, malls, car phones, and daydreams.

Quiet Time in the Middle Ground

The "middle class," then, is not just a "norm" or ideal that signals safety and stasis but a womblike space of affect where forms of sentimentality and a longing for interiority have become tactile.[18] Here, affect is a vitality and hope launched against the nightmare image of social entropy and the vicious blank-screen affect of Other people "out there" who just don't care. Dread is dredged up as the other to the dream of an unhaunted home. What is called the "middle class"—what people thinking as "Americans" now want to identify with—is the affective space where the hegemonic claim to channel trauma into beauty is actualized: the self-help movement; privatization; the banality of franchise culture; exhilarated consumerism; "sensible," solid accumulation; family values; the utopia of colorful decor; instant and easy communication; ever-new techno-

gadgets; repetitive risk routines like the stock market and the daily lottery; and the constant stimulation of the senses and the passions through synaesthetic images, sounds, touches, and smells. The "middle class" is the state of being "inside" the central, hooked-up jumps of affect and privy to the enabling technologies and circuitry of circulation itself. The objects of mass desire have become the very affects of circulation and accumulation themselves—travel; the stock market; information networks; movie fantasies; the accumulation of money, things, and life stages; and the sensible conspicuous consumption of the big, beautiful, basic, intensely sensate commodity-to-live-in like the perfect bathroom done in the textures of old stone or the country farmhouse getaway.

"Outside" is the nothingness, the refused access, that produces a "wilding" scene of crime, chaos, drug-addled monsters, danger, disease, and decay. "Inside," the American Dream settles down into a little vignette stuffed to overflowing with scenes of aesthetic connection. Vitality and potentiality unfold as if automatically or effortlessly, but anxiety is the ground over which they march. Houses painstakingly kept up, yards kept trim and tended, the little family stands beside the sports utility vehicle in the driveway looking up, stock portfolios in hand, everything insured, payments up-to-date, fat-free diet under their belts, Community Watch systems in place. Martha Stewart offers advice on the finishing touches. A dreamy nostalgia conflates with a resurgent modernist image-affect of the new and clean and up-to-date.

Both ideals and materiality grow to excess in the womb of the middle ground, where their transmogrification is both automatic, it seems, and a desperate goal—all that matters. Here, affect literally senses itself through the repetitions of the jump from ideal to matter to ideal. There are big projects, like remodeling, and daily projects, like shopping, making lists, keeping a diary, or taking pictures. Little pleasures are hooked up to the big picture.

Some people watch the stock market channel like others watch the weather channel, hour to hour, minute to minute—like it's background, like it's company, like it knows what's going to happen. The visceral image on the screen is both comforting and exciting: the maps and charts and talking heads, the bright colors and simulated thunderstorms, the big, cheery schoolroom suns, the feeling of being in the middle of something big and inevitable, watching it unfold, deciding what action to take, riding the ups and downs of vitality itself. The weather and the stock mar-

ket become the subjects of conversation-lite: What's the weather gonna do? What's the stock market gonna do? Who knows? That's life, we're all in it together.

The middle ground implodes under the weight of its own literal embodiment as it plays itself out to the point of exhaustion.[19] Remember the suburban ideal, for instance, now transmogrified into the new and improved planned community (which is, in turn, sinking fast even as it is dead set on the path of hegemonic realization). Some critiques of middle-ground excesses claim a decontaminated distance capable of judging them to death. Others, like this one, or like contemporary films that parody suburbia and the nuclear family, take the tack of tracking the affect and drawing it down its own road to banal actualization. But either way, the flat specters of suburbia and the middle class do not die. Far from it—their very ordinariness make them heroes and objects of fascination for the restless gaze of a spectator seeking out scenes of arousal and tactility and for the snoop sniffing out tracks of circulation and impact.

The circulation (exchange value) of late capitalism now depends on the labor of looking. The sensorium is retooled by the hours on the couch watching images cut between ads and stories and news, surfing between channels, and cutting back and forth from the screen to the scene in your house.[20] Affect swells and flexes its muscles as the habit of watching images touch matter grows.

Action movies of masculinity play out a fast-switching dialectic of impending disaster and last-minute reprieve in which agency (or the action/reaction of affect) awakens and takes on a muscled mass. Movies made for women imagine a picture-perfect scene of an Inside—a Home filled with tangible objects that Mean or a Self filled with the intricate dramas of dreams launched, wounded, and finally satisfied or left behind. Affect itself is laid out on the carpet like a beautiful fetish that it is okay to love.

Out There

Meanwhile, "the streets" are littered with cryptic, half-written signs of personal/public disaster like the daily sightings of homeless men and women holding up signs of abjection and will while puppies play at their feet. Here, the arresting image strikes the senses with a negating, yet mesmerizing, force. The graphic lettering that pleads for the attention

of the passing cars glances off the eye as something to avoid like the plague; abjection itself is felt as a contagion.[21] But it is also the fascination of catastrophe, or the sense that something is happening—the surge of affect toward the scene of abjection, or profound homelessness.

The sign of homelessness pleads to be touched, if only in passing, by the dry wind left in the wake of the passing cars. The act of looking at it is other to the power (and anxiety) look that looks in order to mime the desire of others[22]—my desire is your desire and we are all together in the mass desire. The sign on the side of the road makes a gesture toward an ideological center that claims the value of willpower and must leave open the possibility of redemption. But the image of the sign itself offers no affect to mime, no line of vitality to follow, no intimate secret to plumb, no tips to imbibe for safety or good health or the search for things new and vibrant with collective envy. Instead, something sticks out of the side of things like the shock of the Real—Žižek's blot on the camera, Lyotard's "inhuman," Lacan's unassimilated something not quite exhausted by the symbolic.[23]

Even to glance out of the corner of the eye at the sign on the side of the road is a mesmerizing and repellant sidestep. And what it finds in the scene it glances through, half-panicked, is not an affective lead but the abject surge to be included in the very wind of circulation itself. Its message is too starkly one of begging and too perfect to the letter; it points to a painful vulnerability that will try anything, or to parody or fraud.

A dollar bill stuck out of a car window gets a quick surge forward from the one with the sign and the heightened, but unassimilated, affect of a raw contact. "God bless you."

Now we're trudging the rough terrain of bodies, sensuous accumulation, impact.

An Image Gets Stuck in the Middle of Your Brain

Laurie Anderson had a performance exhibit at the Soho Guggenheim called *Your Fortune, $1.* A spooky white plastic owl perched on a stool in a darkened corner of the museum spewed out a stream of two-bit advice, trenchant commentary, and stray advertising lingo plucked out of a realm of sheer circulation. The owl's mechanical yet sensuously grainy voice droned on and on, transfixing me in a flood of Hallmark greeting-card shlock and moments of shocking recognition. One of these mo-

ments of shock came when it said something, I swear, that I had already been anxiously chanting to myself: "Sometimes when you hear someone scream it goes in one ear and out the other. Sometimes it passes right into the middle of your brain and gets stuck there." The flow of circulating signs stopped dead in its tracks. I went home and wrote down a story that had been lodged somewhere in the middle of my brain ever since I'd heard it.

The story starts with a question lodged in a tactile, sensate anxiety and then opens onto an aesthetic scene of the senses. The question: Do you ever wake up in the morning, or in the middle of the night, with a sense of sudden dread and start scanning your dreamy brain for the memory of what you've done or a premonition of what's coming? Some do this all the time; for *us*, this is just what morning has become—a grievous mourning, a "morning" of a different order. The Aesthetic scene of the senses: my big iron bed brushes up against windows onto the back deck. Tropical breezes waft over me in the night, carrying the sweet and fetid smells of kumquat trees and mimosa blossoms. In the dawn there are wild bird cries—mourning doves and grackles. And before that, at certain hours in the still of the night, the train cries in the near distance. When I have guests I give them my bed and they wake up talking about the iron bed and the whistling train as if they feel pleased to be set down in some kind of American Heartland pulsing with the high lonesome sound of nostalgic machine dreams roaming the landscape. But I know why the train sings, so I am only too happy to lay myself down a pallet on the living room floor and fall into a deep sleep with only the smell of old ashes from the fireplace.

The train sings for Bobby—a homeless drunk who laid himself down on the tracks one night and passed out as if he, too, could lay down a pallet and escape. Bobby and his old lady had been down at the free concert at the river and they got into a fight. So Bobby stomped off and ended up at the tracks alone, licking his wounds in the abjection of his own night airs. The train had the pull of the high, lonesome sound in the distance for a drunk taking stock and wallowing in a booze-soaked moment of reprieve. The romance of the whistling train draws close, as if it were the only thing left. As if its promise of tactility and power could chase away his ghosts, Bobby laid himself down on the icy cold tracks and closed his eyes in a bodily movement surging, simultaneously, toward an abject ending and the dream of contact with the iron

substance of a public world that might include him. Then, in the middle of the long train passing over him, he raised his head, awakening. They say that otherwise it would have passed right over him. But who can sleep at a train passing over? Now the train screams out a warning when it approaches that place on the tracks not far from my iron bed. It often wakes me. Or it lodges in my sleep and comes as an unknown shock of anxiety in the morning.

Sometimes the screech of the night train breaks into the light of day, like when I'm stopped at the railroad crossing on the way to the office. The scene of cars and trucks waiting fills with the wild force coming down the tracks. Scenes take shape, like the day a boxcar full of Mexican illegals drifted slowly by and the men at the door were waving and smiling at us like this was their fifteen minutes of fame and we were the welcoming audience. In West Virginia when we waited for the coal trains that would block the only road out of the holler, sometimes for hours, we would get out and lean on the trucks, gazing into the scene as we talked. Sometimes a confident claim would begin to circulate that someday, someone was gonna get a pile of dynamite, blow the train in half, and clear the road for good.

Something in this confidence—the exuberant waving of the new immigrants, the explosive claims in the coal camps, Bobby's lying down to sleep on the tracks—lends itself to Benjamin's dialectics of intoxication.[24] It is the kind of intoxicated confidence that surges between life and dream and cheers on the reckless daydream that a "something else" will suddenly appear on the ravenous horizons of the order of things.

It's as if the subject is literally "touched," or punctured, by a scene and makes herself its convulsive possession.[25] There is abjection in this, but there is also at the same time a vital move to take on a force with sufficient intensity to capture it in the senses. On the one hand, the confident-abject surge is what Hal Foster calls traumatic realism, or a figuring that, like traumatic memory, fails to represent the inflicting force as an object in a symbolic order and therefore feels compelled to literally re-present it over and over, miming the original haunting impact.[26] But it is also the confidence of a subject constituted in the vital move itself—the subject surging to bear an affect, or surging toward an actualization.[27] In this sense it has to be seen not as a lack but as a fullness.[28] Its extreme vulnerability (all of those unwarranted hopes) comes not from a discon-

nection with reality, or a false consciousness, but from the passionate connection of the subject who goes with the flow in an intoxicated moment. It's not as if sober distance promises a true alternative. Rather, it clings to the other extreme—the self-discipline of affect beaten down to reason.

Signs of the Senses

Walking along the river in Austin in the early morning, I always stop on a high bridge that overlooks scenes of fishermen floating in the still water, giant blue herons and swans poised on drowning tree trunks, and mansions perched on distant cliffs. One morning there was a crude sign taped to the bridge. Below it there was a shrine: yellow ribbons, a votive candle with the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on it, and a half dozen burned sticks of incense stuck into the half-burned wax. The sign was both cryptic and stark. At the top was the inscription of the names of star-crossed lovers you can picture repeated over and over on school notebooks and graffitied train trestles. The names were crossed out.

Angela and Jerry

Then the sign-shrine opened onto a cryptic reference to a crime against life, love, and the nation committed by federal agents and the local Austin police department.

> Relationship destroyed, *WITH MALICE* by Federal Agents & A.P.D.
> for beliefs guaranteed under U.S. Constitutional Bill of Rights.
> I miss you Angela, Jessica & Furry Dog Reef –
> Always,
> Jerry

Below this there were several graphics. One was a heart pierced by an arrow and inside it the words "Yankee Girl." Another was a box that had inside it the words "Please come back." Then the message repeated, with an added stress both on the loss and on the artist's signature:

> Angela, Jessica and Furry Dog Reef... *I MISS YOU.*
> May God have mercy on the souls of the *HATEFUL, EVIL, VINDICTIVE* people who conspired to take you from me, and did so with success.
> Angela, I will love you always and forever.
> I miss you, babe,
> Jerry

At the bottom was another pierced heart encircling the words "Yankee Girl."

You can feel the satisfaction in the making of this sign-shrine. Satisfaction as a force, and end, in itself spoken through the bright, blunt, sensate aesthetics of the sign. You can see the demand for satisfaction quivering like flesh in the wavering letters and violent slashes. Bitter fury is its vitality. The grief, fury, and longing it builds, condenses, and heaves at you is not an "expression" of a state of mind, an affect shimmering over an inner content,[29] but a state of the senses making contact with pen and paper and matches. It's theatrical. It's both cryptic and as crystal clear as a scream. In the surge to gather itself to the point of intensity and arrest, it both slashes at itself and spits at the world. It has a strange fullness. Something in its violent surface resists closure and points to a residue; something refuses to disappear.[30]

It's the kind of thing you see every day, in the elaborate poetics of graffiti, for instance: the signatures left so artfully, the politics of slashing through them, crossing them out, erasing them, replicating them all over town. Or in the young girls who "cut" themselves so they can feel alive or, literally "come to their senses." These are inscriptions on surfaces that have no hidden message even though the story line is far from clear. They draw attention, hold a visual fascination. Their surfaces insure against surplus value, or the translation of desire into the abstract and transcendent terms of the symbolic order.[31] They do not ask for interpretation or construct the subject who would assign them a meaning. Yet every day such signs of the senses—these dramas of surge and arrest—are given meaning, or normalized, by reference to "underlying systems" of signification that make them readable as texts. Now we're back in the land of sheer circulations, exchange value, economies, and equilibriums. We enter the unnatural calm of another form of arrest. Then the question becomes, Will the gesture of the shrine-sign shimmer as a curiosity passed on an everyday walking path, and will you feel a little jolt as you pass? Or will the scene resist synaesthesia—in one eye and out the other?

The Optical Eye Also Lunges for Affect

Noticing the shimmer can be dangerous for the thing shimmering. West Virginia. Tommy Creek Holler.[32] Bobby's worried about the Whittakers down by the church. They're grown now and wild looking and there's

been trouble with some rich kids from town who think they're freaks worth capturing on camera.

I remember a powerful still life of the Whittakers from years ago. I went inside their place for the first and only time on a home visit with the doctor from the clinic. The mother was in congestive heart failure and sat, with her swollen ankles propped up, in a beat-up recliner. A half dozen teenage boys grunted and gestured and ran in and out of the house, showing us things. A group of as many younger children sat around on the old mattresses on the floor where they slept. They smiled at us.

Then the mother died. The father put on an old cowboy hat and a beautiful, cheap red and yellow satin cowboy shirt with sequins and drifted off. Mary Jo, the oldest, was able to take care of the others, cashing their disability checks and walking every day to the little store at the end of the holler to get weenies, Ding Dongs, coffee, and little cans of sweet evaporated milk.

The others from Tommy Creek helped keep them together, carrying them to the hospital and fighting to keep their disability. Someone gave them an old trailer, now decayed and collapsing on the spot. In recent years, broken down cars have piled up there too, and some of the Whittakers have built their own shacks. Two of the women go to the Tommy Creek Free Will Good Hope Baptist Church next door, and they testify in a language no one can understand but everyone feels is special; they hug them and tell them they love them. When I drive past their place on the narrow holler there are always several Whittakers standing frozen in the yard, watching me pass. The sight is a graphic moment of arrest. Usually someone will smile and wave back at me as I drift slowly past.

The trouble started when a visiting preacher in from Beckley spotted them on his way to the Tommy Creek church and went back and told his congregation. A church committee came visiting with food and clothes. Then, Bobby says, they realized what they had here and they came back at Christmas with a video camera. A group of teenagers who saw the video in their church were seized by it and surged toward the Whittakers one dark night in the thrill of anticipated encounter. Somehow they found the place down the dark holler and they threw rocks at the Whittakers's shacks to draw them out. A few weeks later they returned, and this time the Whittaker men came out showing guns. Bobby was afraid that the next time the rich kids would be back shooting.

An escalating exchange was sparked by a visceral encounter of images. In a video that blankly recorded an arresting image, young embodiments of a modern middle-ground-in-the-making came face-to-face with an otherness that compelled a closer look. The order of representation gave way to a more violently affective contact. Speeding toward the Whittakers and then calling them out in the night, the kids from Beckley locked spaces and lines of movement together in a provisional hierarchy of relations. They surged toward the scene of their confident excitement, and the Whittakers learned their part in the face of threat: the headlights shining in their sleepy eyes and the crack of hostile shouts.

The Body Throws Itself through Space and Encounters Sheer Impact

Impact makes the social, whether good or bad or both. I was in a small town in southwest Texas and had stopped to eat in the only café in town, which turned out to be one of those places with great steaks and pies and checkered table cloths, where the local ranchers hang out at the end of the day talking crops and fertilizer and machine equipment and everyone notices those passing through. The sun had gone down and I was halfway through my steak and fully into my nostalgia and the excitation of otherness brought to the senses when a biker couple came in limping. I watched them closely as they talked intently and exchanged startled looks. When I got up to leave they called me over to their table and asked if I was heading out on the west road that night and if I would look for bike parts on the road. No, I wasn't, why? They had a story to tell. They had hit a deer coming into town and had lost some bike parts in the dark. The deer, they said, had fared much worse. They were shaken up by the sudden, violent, physical encounter and compelled to repeat the event as the sentience of it still reverberated in their senses. I was only too happy to play the part of audience, caught by the promise and threat of affect's surge.

Notes

1. On the aesthetic charge of the senses, see Paul Trembath, "Aesthetics without Art or Culture: Toward an Alternative Sense of Materialist Agency," *Strategies* 9/10 (1996): 122–51. See also Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 217–39.

2. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). See also Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," 235–36.

3. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994); Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

4. Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," 229.

5. See Michael Taussig, "Tactility and Distraction," *Cultural Anthropology* 6 (1991): 147–53.

6. Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," 234.

7. Alphonso Lingis, "The Society of Dismembered Body Parts," in *Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy*, ed. Constantin Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Routledge, 1993), 296.

8. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

9. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

10. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 157.

11. See Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Hal Foster, "Death in America," *October* 75 (1996): 37–59; Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 234–56.

12. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 197.

13. Robert Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

14. See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Michael Taussig, "Physiognomic Aspects of Visual Worlds," *Visual Anthropology* 8 (1992): 15–28.

15. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 14.

16. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*; Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Reflections*, ed. P. Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 177–92.

17. Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Reflections*, ed. P. Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 61–94.

18. See Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Matthew Archer, "Gated Governmentality" (master's report, University of Texas, 1997); Joan DeJean, "Did the Seventeenth Century Invent Our Fin de Siècle? Or, the Creation of the Enlightenment That We May at Last Be Leaving Behind," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 790–816.

19. See Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 263.

20. See Jonathan Beller, "Cinema, Capital of the Twentieth Century," *Postmodern Culture* 4, no. 3 (1994).

21. See Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998).

22. See Trembath, "Aesthetics without Art or Culture."

23. Žižek, *Looking Awry*; Lyotard, *The Inhuman*; Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977).

24. Benjamin, "Surrealism."

25. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 199. See also Taussig, "Physiognomic Aspects of Visual Worlds," 27.

26. Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). See also Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Lacan, *Écrits*; Lyotard, *The Inhuman*.

27. See Daniel Smith, "Deleuze's Theory of Sensation," in *Delueze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 29–56.

28. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

29. See Lingis, "The Society of Dismembered Body Parts."

30. See Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*.

31. Ibid.

32. See Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).