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What Do Pictures *Really* Want?*

W. J. T. MITCHELL

The dominant questions about pictures in recent work on visual culture and art history have been interpretive and rhetorical. We want to know what pictures mean and what they do: how they communicate as signs and symbols, what sort of power they have to affect human emotions and behavior. When the question of desire is raised, it is usually located in the producers or consumers of images, the picture treated as an expression of the artist's desire, or as a mechanism for eliciting the desires of the beholder. In this paper I'd like to shift the location of desire to images themselves and ask what pictures want. This question certainly does not mean an abandonment of interpretive and rhetorical issues, but it will, I hope, make the question of pictorial meaning and power look somewhat different. It will also help us grasp the fundamental shift in art history and other disciplines that is sometimes called "visual culture" or "visual studies," and which I have associated with a "pictorial turn" in both popular and elite intellectual culture.

To save time, I want to begin with the assumption that we are capable of suspending our disbelief in the very premises of the question, "What do pictures want?" I'm well aware that this is a bizarre, perhaps even objectionable question. I'm aware that it involves a subjectivizing of images, a dubious personification of inanimate objects, that it flirts with a regressive, superstitious attitude toward images, one that if taken seriously would return us to practices like totemism, fetishism, idolatry, and animism. These are practices that most modern, enlightened people regard with suspicion as primitive or childish in their traditional forms (the worship of material objects; the treating of inanimate objects like dolls as if they were alive) and as pathological symptoms in their modern manifestations (fetishism, either of commodities or of neurotic perversion).

I'm also quite aware that the question may sound like a tasteless appropriation

This paper is a condensed and rather different version of an essay entitled "What Do Pictures Want?" that will appear in *Visual Culture, Modernity, and Art History*, ed. Terry Smith (Sydney, Australia: Power Institute, forthcoming). I would like to thank Lauren Berlant, Homi Bhabha, T. J. Clark, Annette Michelson, John Ricco, Terry Smith, Joel Snyder, and Anders Troelsen for their help in thinking about this knotty question.

OCTOBER 77, Summer 1996, pp. 71–82. © 1996 W. J. T. Mitchell.

of an inquiry that is properly reserved for other people, particularly those classes of people who have been the objects of discrimination. The question echoes the whole investigation into the desire of the abject or downcast other, the minority or subaltern that has been so central to the development of modern studies in gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. “What does the black man want?” is the question raised by Franz Fanon, risking the reification of manhood and negritude in a single sentence.¹ “What do women want?” is the question Freud found himself unable to answer.² Women and people of color have struggled to speak directly to these questions, to articulate accounts of their own desire. It is hard to imagine how pictures might do the same, or how any inquiry of this sort could be more than a kind of disingenuous or (at best) unconscious ventriloquism, as if Edgar Bergen were to ask Charlie McCarthy, “What do puppets want?”

Nevertheless, I want to proceed as if the question were worth asking, partly as a kind of thought experiment, simply to see what happens, and partly out of a conviction that this is a question we are already asking, that we cannot help but ask and that therefore deserves analysis. I’m encouraged in this by the precedents of Marx and Freud, who both felt a modern science of the social and the psychological had to deal with the issue of fetishism and animism, the subjectivity of objects, the personhood of things. Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. They present, not just a surface, but a *face* that faces the beholder. While Marx and Freud both treat the personified or subjectified object with deep suspicion, subjecting their respective fetishes to iconoclastic critique, much of their energy is spent in detailing the processes by which the subjectivity of objects is produced in human experience. And it’s a real question whether, in Freud’s case at least, there is any real prospect of “curing” the malady of fetishism. My own position is that the subjectivized object in some form or other is an incurable symptom, and that Marx and Freud are better treated as guides to the understanding of this symptom, and perhaps to some transformation of it into less pathological, damaging forms. In short, we are stuck with our magical, premodern attitudes toward objects, especially pictures, and our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them.

The literary treatment of pictures is, of course, quite unabashed in its celebration of their uncanny personhood. Magic portraits, masks, and mirrors, living statues and haunted houses are everywhere in both modern and traditional narratives, and the aura of these imaginary images seeps into both professional and popular attitudes toward real pictures.³ Art historians may “know” that the

1. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 8.

2. Ernest Jones reports that Freud once exclaimed to Princess Marie Bonaparte, “*Was will das Weib?*—What does woman want?” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 670.

3. Magical pictures and animated objects are an especially salient feature of the nineteenth-century European novel, appearing in the pages of Balzac, the Brontës, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, and of course throughout the Gothic novel. See Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images: A Literary*

pictures they study are only material objects that have been marked with colors and shapes, but they frequently talk and act as if pictures had will, consciousness, agency, and desire.⁴ Everyone knows that a photograph of their mother is not alive, but they will still be reluctant to deface or destroy it. No modern, rational, secular person thinks that pictures are to be treated like persons, but we always seem to be willing to make exceptions for special cases.

And this attitude is not confined to valuable art works or pictures that have personal significance. Every advertising executive knows that some images, to use the trade jargon, “have legs,” that is, they seem to have a surprising capacity to generate new directions and surprising twists in an ad campaign, as if they had an intelligence and purposiveness of their own. When Moses demands that Aaron explain the making of the Golden Calf, Aaron says that he merely threw the Israelites’ gold jewelry into the fire “and this calf came out,” as if it were a self-created automaton. Evidently idols have legs too. The idea that images have a kind of social or psychological power of their own is, in fact, the reigning cliché of contemporary visual culture. The claim that we live in a society of spectacle, surveillance, and simulacra is not merely an insight of advanced cultural criticism; a sports and advertising icon like André Agassi can say that “image is everything” and be understood as speaking not only *about* images, but *for* images, as someone who is himself seen as “nothing but an image.”

There is no difficulty, then, in demonstrating that the idea of the personhood of pictures is just as alive in the modern world as it was in traditional societies. The difficulty is in knowing what to say next. How are traditional attitudes toward images—idolatry, fetishism, totemism—refunctioned in modern societies? Is our task as cultural critics to demystify these images, to smash the modern idols, to expose the fetishes that enslave people? Is it to discriminate between true and false, healthy and sick, pure and impure, good and evil images? Are images the terrain on which political struggle should be waged, the site on which a new ethics is to be articulated?

There is a strong temptation to answer these questions with a resounding yes and to take the critique of visual culture as a straightforward strategy of political intervention. This sort of criticism proceeds by exposing images as agents of ideo-

Iconology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). It’s as if the encounter with and destruction of traditional or premodern “fetishistic” societies produced a post-Enlightenment resurgence of subjectivized objects in Victorian domestic spaces.

4. The full documentation of the trope of the personified and “living” work of art in Western art-historical discourse would require a separate essay. Such an essay might begin with a look at the status of the art object in the three canonical “fathers” of art history, Vasari, Winckelmann, and Hegel. It would find, I suspect, that the progressive and teleological narratives of Western art are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of appearance and visual realism, but on the question of how, in Vasari’s terms, “liveliness” and “animation” are to be infused into the object. Winckelmann’s treatment of artistic media as agents in their own historical development and his description of the Apollo Belvedere as an object so full of divine animation that it turns the spectator into a Pygmalion figure, a statue brought to life, would be a central focus in such an essay, as would Hegel’s treatment of the artistic object as a material thing that has received “the baptism of the spiritual.”

logical manipulation and actual human damage. At one extreme is the claim of Catherine MacKinnon that pornography is not just a representation of violence toward and degradation of women, but an *act* of violent degradation.⁵ There are also the familiar and less controversial arguments in the political critique of visual culture: that Hollywood cinema constructs women as objects of the “male gaze”; that the unlettered masses are manipulated by the images of visual media and popular culture; that people of color are subject to graphic stereotypes and racist visual discrimination; that art museums are a kind of hybrid form of religious temple and bank in which commodity fetishes are displayed for rituals of public veneration that are designed to produce surplus aesthetic and economic value.

I want to say that all these arguments have some truth to them (in fact, I’ve made many of them myself) but also that there is something radically unsatisfactory about them. Perhaps the most obvious problem is that the critical exposure and demolition of the nefarious power of images is both easy and ineffectual. Pictures are a popular political antagonist because one can take a tough stand on them and yet, at the end of the day, everything remains pretty much the same. Scopic regimes can be overturned repeatedly without any visible effect on either visual or political culture. In MacKinnon’s case, the absurdity of this enterprise is quite evident. Are the energies of a progressive, humane politics that seeks social and economic justice really well spent on a campaign to stamp out pornography? Or is this at best a mere symptom of political frustration, at worst a real diversion of progressive political energy into collaboration with dubious forms of political reaction?

In short, I think it may be time to rein in our notions of the political stakes in a critique of visual culture and to scale down the rhetoric of the “power of images.” Images are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think. The problem is to refine and complicate our estimate of their power and the way it works. That is why I shift the question from what pictures *do* to what they *want*, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak. If the power of images is like the power of the weak, that may be why their desire is correspondingly strong, to make up for their actual impotence. We as critics may want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them.

The subaltern model of the picture on the other hand, opens up the actual dialectics of power and desire in our relations with pictures. When Fanon reflects on negritude, he describes it as a “corporeal malediction” that is hurled in the immediacy of the visual encounter, “Look, a Negro.”⁶ But the construction of the racial and racist stereotype is not a simple exercise of the picture as a technique of domination. It is the knotting of a double bind that afflicts both the subject and

5. See Catherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 172–73, 192–93.

6. Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 109.

the object of racism.⁷ The ocular violence of racism splits its object in two, rending and rendering it simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, an object of, in Fanon's words, "abomination" and "adoration."⁸ "Abomination" and "adoration" are precisely the terms in which idolatry is excoriated in the bible.⁹ The idol, like the black man, is both despised and worshiped, reviled for being a nonentity, a slave, and feared as an alien and supernatural power. If idolatry is the most dramatic form of image-power known to visual culture, it is a remarkably ambivalent and ambiguous kind of force. Insofar as visibility and visual culture are infected by a kind of "guilt by association" with idolatry and the evil eye of racism, it is no wonder that Martin Jay can think of the "eye" itself as something that is repeatedly "cast down" in Western culture and vision as something that has been repeatedly subjected to "denigration."¹⁰ If pictures are persons, then, they are colored or marked persons, and the scandal of the purely white or purely black canvas, the blank, unmarked surface, presents quite a different face.¹¹

As for the gender of pictures, it's clear that the "default" position of images is feminine, "constructing spectatorship," in Norman Bryson's words, "around an opposition between woman as image and man as the bearer of the look."¹² The question of what pictures want, then, is inseparable from the question of what women want. Chaucer, anticipating Freud, stages a narrative around the question, "What is it that women most desire?" This question is posed to a knight who has been found guilty of raping a lady of the court, and who is given a one-year reprieve on his death sentence to go in quest of the right answer. If he returns with the wrong answer, the death sentence will be carried out. The knight hears many wrong answers from the women he interviews—money, reputation, love,

7. For a subtle analysis of this double bind, see Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 66–84.

8. "To us, the man who adores the Negro is as 'sick' as the man who abominates him" (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 8).

9. See, for instance, the description of the idol of Ashtoreth, "the abomination of Sidonians, and Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and . . . Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites" (2 Kings 23:13), and Isaiah 44:19: "shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" The *Oxford English Dictionary* lays out the doubtful etymology: "Abominable, regularly spelt *abominable*, and explained as *ab homine*, and explained as 'away from man, inhuman, bestialy.'" The association of the animate image with beasts is, I suspect, a crucial feature of pictorial desire. "Abomination" is also a term regularly applied to "unclean" or taboo animals in the Bible as well. See Carlo Ginzburg on the idol as a "monstrous" image presenting impossible "composite" forms that combine human and animal features, in "Idols and Likenesses: Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* VIII.3, and Its Reception," in *Sight & Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich at 85* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994).

10. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

11. Caroline Jones suggests that Rauschenberg thought of his white paintings as "hypersensitive tender membranes registering the slightest phenomenon on their white skins." See her "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993), pp. 647–49.

12. Introduction to *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994), p. xxv.

beauty, fine clothes, lust abed, many admirers. The right answer turns out to be “maistrye,” a complex Middle English term that equivocates between “mastery” by right or consent, and the power that goes with superior strength or cunning.¹³ The official moral of Chaucer’s tale is that consensual, freely given mastery is best, but Chaucer’s narrator, the cynical and worldly Wife of Bath, knows that women want (that is, lack) power, and they will take whatever kind they can get.

What is the moral for pictures? If one could interview all the pictures one encounters in a year, what answers would they give? Surely, many of the pictures would give Chaucer’s “wrong” answers: that is, pictures would want to be worth a lot of money; they would want to be admired and praised as beautiful; they would want to be adored by many lovers. But above all they would want a kind of mastery over the beholder. Michael Fried summarizes painting’s “primordial convention” in precisely these terms: “a painting . . . had first to attract the beholder, then to arrest and finally to enthrall the beholder, that is a painting had to call to someone, bring him to a halt in front of itself and hold him there as if spellbound and unable to move.”¹⁴ The painting’s desire, in short, is to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him into an image for the gaze of the picture in what might be called “the Medusa effect.” This effect is perhaps the clearest demonstration we have that the power of pictures and of women are modeled on one another and that this is a model of both pictures and women that is abject, mutilated, and castrated. The power they want is manifested as *lack*, not as possession.

We could no doubt elaborate the linkage between pictures, femininity, and negritude much more fully, taking into account other variations on the subaltern status of images in terms of other models of gender, sexual identity, cultural location, and even species identity (suppose, for instance, that the desires of pictures were modeled on the desires of animals? What does Wittgenstein mean in his frequent reference to certain pervasive philosophical metaphors as “queer pictures”?). But I want to turn now simply to the model of Chaucer’s quest and see what happens if we question pictures about their desires instead of looking at them as vehicles of meaning or instruments of power.

I begin with a picture that wears its heart on its sleeve, the famous “Uncle Sam” recruiting poster for the U.S. Army, designed by James Montgomery Flagg during World War I. This is an image whose desires seem absolutely clear, focused on a determinate object: it wants “you,” that is, the young men of the proper age for military service. The immediate desire of the picture looks like a version of the Medusa effect: that is, it “hails” the viewer, verbally, and tries to transfix him with the directness of its gaze and (its most wonderful pictorial feature) the foreshortened pointing hand and finger that single out the viewer, accusing, designating, and commanding the viewer. But the desire to transfix is only a transitory and momentary urge. The longer range motive is to move and mobilize the viewer, to

13. My thanks to Jay Sclausener for his help with the Chaucerian notion of “maistrye.”

14. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 92.

send him on to “the nearest recruiting station,” and ultimately overseas to fight and possibly die for his country.

So far, however, this is only a reading of what might be called the overt signs of positive desire. The gesture of the pointing or beckoning hand is a common feature of the modern recruiting poster. To go any further than this we need to ask what the picture wants in terms of lack. Here the contrast with the German poster is clarifying. This is a poster in which a young soldier hails his brothers, calling them to the brotherhood of honorable death in battle. *Uncle Sam*, as his name indicates, has a more tenuous, indirect relation to the potential recruit. He is an older man who lacks the youthful vigor for combat, and perhaps even more important, lacks the direct blood connection that a figure of the fatherland would evoke. He asks young men to go fight and die in a war in which neither he nor his sons will participate. There are no “sons” of Uncle Sam, only “real live nephews” as George M. Cohan put it; Uncle Sam himself is sterile, a kind of abstract, pasteboard figure who has no body, no blood, but who impersonates the nation and calls for other men’s sons to donate their bodies and their blood. It’s only appropriate that he is a pictorial descendant of British caricatures of “Yankee Doodle,” a figure of ridicule that adorned the pages of *Punch* throughout the nineteenth century. His ultimate ancestor is a real person, “Uncle Sam” Wilson, a supplier of beef to the U.S. Army during the War of 1812. One can imagine a scene in which the original prototype for Uncle Sam is addressing, not a group of young men, but a herd of cattle about to be slaughtered.

So what does this picture want? A full analysis would take us deep into the political unconscious of a nation that is nominally imagined as a disembodied abstraction, an Enlightenment polity of laws and not men, principles and not blood relationships, and actually embodied as a place where old white men send young men of all races to fight their wars. What this real and imagined nation lacks is meat—bodies and blood—and what it sends to obtain them is a hollow man, a meat supplier, or perhaps just an artist. The contemporary model for the Uncle Sam poster, as it turns out, was James Montgomery Flagg himself. Uncle Sam is thus a self-portrait of the patriotic American artist in national drag, reproducing himself in millions of identical prints, the sort of fertility that is available to images and to artists. The “disembodiment” of his mass-produced image is countered by its concrete embodiment and location in relation to recruiting stations (and the bodies of real recruits) all over the nation.

Given this background, you might think it a wonder that this poster had any power or effectiveness at all as a recruiting device, and indeed, it would be very difficult to know anything about the real power of the image. What one can describe, however, is its construction of desire in relation to fantasies of power and impotence. Perhaps the image’s subtle candor about its bloodless sterility, as well as its origins in commerce and caricature, are what combine to make it seem so appropriate a symbol of the United States.

Sometimes the explicit signs of desire already signify lack rather than power

to command, as in the Warner Bros. poster of Al Jolson for *The Jazz Singer*, whose hand gestures connote beseeching and pleading, declarations of love for a “Mammy” and an audience that is to be moved to the theater, not to the recruiting office. What this picture wants, as distinct from what it asks for, is a stable relation between figure and ground, a way of demarcating body from space, skin from clothing, the exterior of the body from its interior. And this is what it cannot have, for the stigmata of race and body image are dissolved into a shuttle of shifting black and white spaces that “flicker” before us like the cinematic medium itself and the scene of racial masquerade it promises. What the picture awakens our desire to see, as Lacan might put it, is exactly what it cannot show. This impotence is what gives it whatever specific power it has.

Sometimes the disappearance of the object of visual desire in a picture is a direct trace of the activity of generations of viewers, as in the following Byzantine miniature from the eleventh century. The figure of Christ, like that of Uncle Sam and Al Jolson, directly addresses the viewer with the verses from the Seventy-eighth Psalm, “Give heed, O my people, to my law; incline your ear to the words of my mouth.” What is clear from the physical evidence of the picture, however, is that ears have not been inclined to the words of the mouth so much as mouths have been pressed to the lips of the image, wearing away its face to near oblivion. These are viewers who have followed the advice of John of Damascus “to embrace [images] with the eyes, the lips, the heart.”¹⁵ Like Uncle Sam, this is an image that

15. See Robert S. Nelson, “The Discourse of Icons, Then and Now,” *Art History* 12, no. 2 (June 1989), pp. 144–55, for a fuller discussion.



James Montgomery Flagg. U.S. Army recruiting poster.



German enlistment poster. Circa 1915–16.

wants the beholder’s body and blood and spirit; unlike Uncle Sam, it gives away its own body in the encounter, in a kind of pictorial reenactment of the eucharistic sacrifice. The defacement of the image is not a desecration but a recirculation of the painted body in the body of the beholder.

These sorts of direct expressions of pictorial desire are, of course, generally associated with “vulgar” modes of imaging—commercial advertising, and political or religious propaganda. The picture as subaltern makes an appeal or issues a command whose precise effect and power emerge in an intersubjective encounter compounded of signs of positive desire and traces of lack or impotence. But what of the “work of art” proper, the aesthetic object that is simply supposed to “be” in its beauty or sublimity? One answer is provided by Michael Fried, who argues that the emergence of modern art is precisely to be understood in terms of the negation or renunciation of direct signs of desire. The process of pictorial seduction Fried admires is successful precisely in proportion to its indirectness, its seeming indifference to the beholder, its antitheatrical “absorption” in its own internal drama. The very special sort of pictures that enthrall Fried get what they want by seeming not to want anything, by pretending that they have everything they need. Fried’s discussions of Gericault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* and Chardin’s *Boy with a Bubble* might be taken as exemplary here and help us to see that it is not merely a question of what the figures in the pictures appear to want, but the legible signs of desire that they convey. This desire may be enraptured and contemplative, as it is in *Boy with a Bubble*, where the shimmering and trebling globe that absorbs the figure becomes “a natural correlative for [Chardin’s] own engrossment in the act of painting and a proleptic mirroring of what he trusted would be the absorption



The Jazz Singer. Warner Bros. Poster. 1927.



Christ. Washington, Dumbarton Oaks.

of the beholder before the finished work” (51). Or it may be violent, as in *The Raft of the Medusa*, where the “strivings of the men on the raft” are not simply to be understood in relation to its internal composition and the sign of the rescue ship on the horizon, “but also by the need to escape our gaze, to put an end to being beheld by us, to be rescued from the ineluctable fact of a presence that threatens to theatricalize even their sufferings” (154).

The end point of this sort of pictorial desire is, I think, the purism of modernist abstraction, whose negation of the beholder’s presence is articulated in Wilhelm Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy* and displayed in its final reduction in the white paintings of the early Rauschenberg. Abstract paintings are pictures that want not to be pictures. But the desire not to show desire is, as Lacan reminds us, still a form of desire. The whole antitheatrical tradition reminds one again of the default feminization of the picture, which is treated as something that must awaken desire in the beholder while not disclosing any signs of desire or even awareness that it is being beheld, as if the beholder were a voyeur at a keyhole.

Barbara Kruger’s photo collage *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* speaks rather directly to this purist or puritanical account of pictorial desire. The marble face in the picture, like the absorbed face of Chardin’s boy with a bubble, is shown in profile, oblivious to the gaze of the spectator or the harsh beam of light that rakes its features from above. The inwardness of the figure, its blank eyes and stony absence of expression make it seem beyond desire, in that state of pure serenity we associate with classical beauty. But the verbal labels glued on to the picture send an absolutely contrary message: “your gaze hits the side of my face.”



Jean-Baptiste Chardin. *Soap Bubbles*.
Circa 1731–33.



Barbara Kruger. *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*. 1982.

If we read these words as spoken by the statue, the whole look of the face suddenly changes, as if it were a living person who had just been turned to stone, and the spectator were in the Medusa position, casting her violent, baleful gaze on the picture. But the placement and segmentation of the inscription (not to mention the use of the shifters “your” and “my”) make the words seem alternately to float above and to fasten themselves to the surface of the photograph. The words “belong” alternately to the statue, the photograph, and to the artist whose labor of cutting and pasting is so conspicuously foregrounded. We may, for instance, want to read this as a straightforward message about the gender politics of the gaze, a female figure complaining about the violence of male “lookism.” But the statue’s gender is quite indeterminate; it could be a Ganymede. And if the words belong to the photograph or the whole composition, what gender are we to attribute to them? This picture sends at least three incompatible messages about its desire: it wants to be seen; it doesn’t want to be seen; it is indifferent to being seen. Like the Al Jolson poster, its power comes from a kind of flickering of alternate readings, one which leaves the viewer in a sort of paralysis, simultaneously “caught looking” as an exposed voyeur and hailed as a Medusa whose eyes are deadly.

So what do pictures want? Are there any general conclusions to be drawn from this hasty survey?

My first thought is that, despite my opening gesture of moving away from questions of meaning and power to the question of desire, I have continually circled back to the procedures of semiotics, hermeneutics, and rhetoric. The question of what pictures want certainly does not eliminate the interpretation of signs. All it accomplishes is a subtle dislocation of the target of interpretation, a slight modification in the picture we have of pictures (and perhaps signs) themselves.¹⁶ The keys to this modification/dislocation are (1) assent to the constitutive fiction of pictures as “animated” beings, quasi agents, mock persons; (2) the construal of these persons, not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits, but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference and who function both as “go-betweens” and scapegoats in the social field of human visibility. It’s crucial to this strategic shift that we not confuse the desire of the picture with the desires of the artist, the beholder, or even the figures in the picture. What pictures want is not the same as the message they communicate or the effect they produce; it’s not even the same as what they say they want. Like people, pictures don’t know what they want; they have to be helped to recollect it through a dialogue with others.

I could have made this inquiry harder by looking at abstract paintings (pictures that want not to be pictures) or at genres like landscape where personhood emerges only as a “filigree,” to use Lacan’s expression. I begin with the *face* as the primordial

16. Joel Snyder suggests that this shift of attention is describable by Aristotle’s distinction between rhetoric (the study of communication of meaning and effects) and poetics (the analysis of the properties of a made thing, treated as if it has a soul).

object and surface of mimesis, from the tattooed visage to painted faces. But the question of desire may be addressed to any picture, and this paper is nothing more than a suggestion to try it out for yourself.

What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology. Contemporary discussions of visual culture often seem distracted by a rhetoric of innovation and modernization. They want to update art history by playing catch-up with the text-based disciplines and with the study of film and mass culture. They want to erase the distinctions between high and low culture and transform “the history of art into the history of images.” They want to “break” with art history’s supposed reliance on naive notions of “resemblance or mimesis,” the superstitious “natural attitudes” toward pictures that seem so difficult to stamp out. They appeal to “semiotic” or “discursive” models of images that will reveal them as projections of ideology, technologies of domination to be resisted by clear-sighted critique.¹⁷

It’s not so much that this idea of visual culture is wrong or fruitless. On the contrary, it has produced a remarkable transformation in the sleepy confines of academic art history. But is that all we want? Or (more to the point) is that all that pictures want? The most far-reaching shift signaled by the search for an adequate concept of visual culture is its emphasis on the social field of the visual, the everyday processes of looking at others and being looked at. This complex field of visual reciprocity is not merely a by-product of social reality but actively constitutive of it. Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the “sign,” or to discourse. Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled into a “history of images” nor elevated into a “history of art” but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities. They want a hermeneutic that would return to the opening gesture of Panofsky’s iconology, before Panofsky elaborates his method of interpretation and compares the initial encounter with a picture to a meeting with “an acquaintance” who “greet me on the street by removing his hat.”

What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshiped, smashed, exposed, demystified, or to enthrall their beholders. They may not even want to be granted subjectivity or personhood by well-meaning commentators who think that humanness is the greatest compliment they could pay to pictures. The desires of pictures may be inhuman or nonhuman, better modeled by figures of animals, machines, or cyborgs, or by even more basic images—what Erasmus Darwin called “the loves of plants.” What pictures want in the last instance, then, is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all.

17. I am summarizing here the basic claims made by Bryson, Holly, and Moxey in their editorial introduction to *Visual Culture*.