

5.2 *Mimesis* (aka Imitation)

Reading and Doing Ethnography
Social Anthropology 314

Mimesis: Miming,
imitating, copying.

Adjective: *mimetic*.

Social strategies always involve mimesis

- >> Strategies are part-scripted, part-improvised procedures for getting things done in a social situation.
- >> Strategies themselves are learned by imitating and observing past strategies.
- >> Social *situations* themselves are imitations of past social situations in the same *genre of encounter*.

Genres of encounter

- » Genre: like a category of text or of sexual identity.
- » "Gender" and literary "genre" have the same etymological root (a classificatory kind).
- » Encounters come in all sorts: with a stranger, with a family member, with a policeman (Althusser's "Hey you!"), with a piece of technology (your phone), with a moment in time ("how's your day?").
- » But practically all of them are *genred*, meaning that they have a standardized form.

Gender, as a social strategy, is highly mimetic

- >> To be a *man* for example is to be like other men.
- >> This relationship to a gendered type does not exclude a degree of individuality.
- >> There are obviously many different models of masculinity that one can imitate.
- >> To enact your gender is to draw (probably unconsciously) on extant models of your gender.
- >> Other observers are also potentially going to see you in terms of your mimetic relationships to gender models, as they construe them.

Clips on gender

Judith Butler, "Your behavior creates your gender"

Japanese Manhood and Giant Potato Chips

Different ways of expressing masculinity

Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity

... The Cuna shaman of the San Blas Islands off Panama, faced with a woman in obstructed labor and singing for the restoration of her soul. By her hammock in his singing he is seeing, scrutinizing, bringing in to being an allegory of the cosmos as woman through whom is plotted the journey along the birth canal of the world—an action he undertakes by first awakening congealed life in his petrified fetish-objects, carved wooden figurines now standing by the laboring woman. (1)

"The medicine man gives you a living soul, the medicine man changes for you your soul, like all replicas, like all twin figures." Note the replicas. Note the magical, the soulful power that derives from replication. For this is where we must begin: with the magical power of replication, the image affecting what it is an image of, wherein the representation shares in or takes power from the represented--testimony to the power of the mimetic faculty through whose awakening we might not so much understand that shadow of science known as magic... but see anew the spell of the natural where the reproduction of life merges with the recapture of the soul. (2)

"The wooden figures which the Cunas carve and use as abiding places for their helping spirits, no longer look like either Indians or demons, but like white people." Why should [they] be carved in the form of "European types"? In short: Why are they Other, and why are they the Colonial Other? (7)

The very mimicry corrodes the alterity by which my science is nourished. For now I too am part of the object of study. The Indians have made me alter to my self. (8)

Further considerations

- >> "The spirit of the wood, not its outer form, determines the efficacy of the figurine" (8).
- >> "Figurines can counsel the healer" (9).
- >> "'In some way or other' the making and existence of the artifact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed." (13)
- >> The figurines have to be read against other mimetic artifacts (the decoy turtles, the model spirit boat).

Two kinds of ethnography (16)

- >> Abstract general locutions such as "Among the Emberá it is believed that..."
- >> Image-ful particularity, a sensuous sense of the real — i.e. concrete examples.

Questions

- >> How does Mimesis effect our everyday life?
- >> Why do these people male figures of Europeans? Do they want to be like them? Do they fins them superior and thus want to imitate them?
- >> Why do people, cultures and even whole countries try to imitate Western ideals?
- >> If you are doing participant observation and you just merely mimic the work of others at the ethnographic site. Are you allowed to write about your opinion of the work you are doing as a participant or would that be too subjective?
- >> Why does the author seem so distressed about being part of the "European type" figures, but then switch over and speak as if he is one of the indians he is studying? Is this done in an attempt to remove himself from the "other" position, or is it to not other the indians themselves?

Questions

- >> Mimesis as described by Taussig is represented by humans replicating creatures/people/etc... so is it possible to think of mimesis in this case could be about pulling external features into a culture? For example, the cuna being represented as white people after interactions.
- >> Is it bad to copy something without knowing the context of it?
- >> How do you come to a conclusion in ethnography from a spiritual, naturalistic belief in contrast to a scientific belief? Surely these beliefs contradict one another, yet how does an ethnographer come to a sole conclusion with opposing thoughts?
- >> Why do these people make figures of Europeans? Do they want to be like them? Do they find them superior and thus want to imitate them?
- >> Is mimesis an altering state?

Questions

- » What is meant by fetishes or fetish-objects in this context?
- » In which country does the fieldwork take place?
- » Explain catholic modernization
- » Does Taussig have a theological background and does he do his field work through linking theology and anthropology. Does he consider imitating something or someone as an easier way to get to understand that object or person?
- » What is suggested by 'nuchus'?
- » The focus on religion is very important, but how does one not become biased between two very different types of religion- such as Catholic modernization and paganism?
- » In the first few paragraphs Taussig refers to "replicas" and "replication". What does he mean by this?
- » What are the specific cultural markers or practices that are carried on and emulated in all societies?
- » How can one protect oneself from the spirits by protecting by portraying them?