

## *Die Macht des Anschaulichen.* Fritz W. Kramer and Mimesis in Africa

**Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi**

### Dog on a leash

In the summer of 2012, I travel for a few days to a small Mediterranean Island in Greece.<sup>1</sup> On a beach, the majestic blue of the Peloponnesian sea contrasts to the pale bodies recovering from oppressive workdays by flaunting bellies and backs. I see a family lying a few meters away from me. The family has a daughter, whose age is probably six or seven. The girl catches my attention. A simple rope is loosely tied around her neck. As if to counter the otiose abandon of her surroundings, she quickly plods through the sand on all four extremities, as if she were a canid animal. She is careful not to use her knees or elbows, but only her entire legs and arms stretched to their limits causing some difficulty. The spirited trudging stirs up sand and annoys some tourists. But the girl does not care and her mother does not discipline her. In a practiced mimicker, she pulls out her tongue and offers an empty stare. She cants her head and then raises her eyebrows – maybe an attempt to move her ears up and down in the way of dogs. At an unoccupied sitting bench shaded by an open umbrella, she begins to sniffle. Her mother keeps on holding the rope

---

1 I follow my countrymen to one of their most prized tourist destinations in Europe since the 1970s. Germans frequently choose Greece, and especially the country's myriad of Mediterranean Islands, for the exquisite repose they offer. Indeed, it was the first time I came to see the splendor of this part of the world. To Germans, Greece combines the exoticism of what is deemed an ancient civilization with the recuperative calmness requisite for an affluent middle class (under which lies hidden an old concern about the political incalculability of the Balkans). It is curious to realize, however, that the same qualities that attracted tourists became reinterpreted as sluggish and indulgent once that country's economic problems became pronounced object of debates in German news media. The connection between the decidedly positive and restorative experience of Greece and its default on national debt was made only indirectly through the invocation of *Alltagskultur* (everyday culture, quotidian way of life) in a strangely punitive register. Germans resented that Greeks had borrowed money in excess in order to buy goods, including those imported from Germany. Hence, some of the discussions in the media can only be described as bizarre. They remained clueless and unperturbed exactly by what Germans de facto sought there: a market for German goods and a laid-back holiday atmosphere.

in a defeated pose. After walking her daughter for a while, she lets go of it and returns to her blanket to read a book. The daughter, unperturbed by sudden desertion, lifts her head, looks at the sea standing on all fours, panting. She tries catching waves with her snout, but, curiously, never attempts to bark.

For the duration of her performance the girl apparently wanted to be a dog, not a little girl. How did the girl's excitement come about? Did she render a general member of the species or, perchance, a specific one? She could have had those in mind that frequently appear as images posing in photographs, barking on screens, talking in animated movies; or live-ones that cower under seats in trains and huddle in busses of European cities. To be sure there was nothing cartoonish in her execution; if anything it appeared somewhat robotic. Was it a Greek or a German dog? And would that even make any difference? Her model could have been the dog that was left at home while the family was on vacation; or a neighbor's pet inclusive of a proper name and a specific look. She could have played the one she hoped her parents had acquired but never did – an attempt to compensate for her longing. While I cannot say where her model came from, at some point the girl relented to an impulse to realistically imitate the animal. It is unclear when she first took hold of the image of a dog.

Whatever provided the initial spark to this girl's movements insufficiently explains the vividness of a detailed performance. While the dog played by the girl explored a beach, the girl playing dog explored the animal's movements. This play was a form of *labor* but that term does not truly catch what she did. Judging by the leash, her performance was not a first one, yet her movements were far from routine. I got the impression that the girl realized that a dog on a beach can only be a dog on a beach. The animal has no possibility to escape that predicament and it was exactly this insight that the girl made vividly present. But to whom? Pressing on from movement to movement, she yielded to all the canid motions her body could muster following what appeared like the contours of an image. It was a realistic display despite the obvious limits the human physical structure poses when corporally performing a canine.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly she became absorbed in this activity. Given that she was so entirely neglectful of her surroundings, I cannot reduce her activity to the presence of an immediate audience. I eventually got tired observing her. It is arduous to interpret the girl's behavior any further without knowing a lot more about her affection for animals, the relation to her parents as well as their relation to dogs, and myriad of other things.

---

2 In writing I, too, encounter limits of descriptive exposition in order to account for her activity. I compensate by choosing verbs that suggest to the reader the expected behavior of a dog: sniffle, pant, plod, trudge (instead of smell, crawl, breathe, or walk). A more neutral representation of the girl's exact movements would become too cumbersome if not altogether surpass my skill of expository writing. The girl, it must be said, only moved her body and made very slight noises while she played. It is me who interprets these movements as representing a dog.

While this girl's level of absorption was pronounced, we are usually not particularly surprised by our ability to mimic other species.<sup>3</sup> We conceptualize this ability through reference to mind, the mediator between the actual dog, its mental representation (idea) and the acting person providing their interface. One can understand her performance as a form of interpretation. Her physical movements were focused on the concrete forms that dog behavior takes. In the kinetic pattern she enacted we can see what about dog must have made a lasting impression on her. While the image of a dog is understood to come from without (she must have seen one at some point), it is in her memory that we believe such material to be located. The mimicry is thus understood first and foremost as a mental or psychic fact that becomes externalized through corporeal motility.

If we consider alternatives to such an understanding, more interesting possibilities emerge. When a girl moves like a dog, how is it that we rarely suspect an actual dog to be moving within her? Nor do we normally assume that the image of a dog has an autonomous force over her arms and legs compelling and coordinating movements against her will. We do not say that the girl is inhabited by a dog. And if we do, we are understood to deploy *metaphor*. What becomes dog in the girl is not conceptualized as ›spirit‹ or ›breath‹ making itself present by leaving its mark, the contagion of a separate existence to which her body readily ceded. Rather, we understand it to be the girl that makes present to herself a dog, whether as image or idea, which dwells permanently within her.

The consequence of such conventional understandings are vast. Were the girl exhibiting too excessive a need to play; if she insisted to be dog for good, or to have always been a dog in the first place, we would likely employ a psychological language in order to diagnose a pathological condition. If the girl insisted she was puppet to a dog, and not vice versa, we would consider this silly nonsense, a funny game of reversal at best. The only legitimate agent we are accustomed to accept is the girl, or her thinking mind, and

---

3 In the Western world (roughly speaking) the image of *dog-on-a-leash* is nothing unusual. There are many kinds of animal personifications that children may perform. In my own childhood, I distinctively recall a high school excursion to *Glienicker Brücke* in south-west Berlin (part of former West Germany), not far from the city of Potsdam (former East Germany). In view of the bridge separating the two countries, a group of female classmates suddenly took to trotting and neighing like horses for several hours as if they were riding over sloping hills covering an idyllic British countryside. They played ›Black Beauty‹ and other such animal figures from contemporary adaptations that encouraged an identification with animal characters (the original novel *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse* was written by Anna Sewell and published in 1877). The horse is an animal that needs a horizon into which it can run. As if in response to the stifling atmosphere of walled-in Berlin, they imagined an open countryside of green hills stretching into an uninterrupted expanse. In another example, a childhood friend of mine, a few years my junior, was obsessed with pigs and anything having to do with these animals: their various shapes and colors, their snouts, their habits of eating, their oinking and squealing. Her father was originally from Bavaria and for a while a member of the extremist *Bewegung 2. Juni*—a great cook of southern German cuisine caught in the culinary desert of left-leaning Berlin. In both examples, the animals in question (horse and pig, respectively), while performed or otherwise represented in their typified behaviors, were unambiguously anthropomorphized. The point was to do as animal what one anyway does: playing with friends. The girl described above, by contrast, seemingly *becomes* a dog. In her performance she was alone.

thus any behavior deemed overly compulsive would quickly suggest mental, psychological, or cognitive illness.<sup>4</sup> The only legitimate object we accept is *dog*, a word and concept with clearly defined semantic content. What remains noteworthy in the way we conceive bodily impulses to move and play is what becomes implicitly foreclosed: that which our categories and conventional logic quickly pass over and resist speculating. Surprising remains also the square confidence with which we engage in such straight interpretation. We know from various contexts that images can haunt and possess us momentarily, in wake or in dreams, even for longer periods of time. We know that the power of signification of, say, a word, can far surpass our ability to control. When we try to articulate what left an impression on us, the elements are frequently channeled into the way we express that experience. And yet this girl's behavior appears an unlikely candidate for all such interpretations, because we expect children to engage in behavior that is playfully explorative, apparently useless, and frequently embarrassing. And so, we leave it at that.

Marcel Jousse, French anthropologist and fervent advocate of an *Anthropologie du Geste*, had a different way of conceptualizing human mimetic behavior. In his work we encounter a plethora of highly suggestive terms, such as *algébrosé*, *bilateralisé*, or *mimismologique*, with which he tried to account for the mysterious mechanisms by which gesture, bodily comportment and movement interact with the world, that is, how actions act upon actions. I stumbled upon him by sheer coincidence while browsing French academic bookshops for unknown treasures. In several *librairies* on *rue des Écoles* in Paris, I made his acquaintance by repeatedly recognizing his name on covers adorning the shelves. Most of my French interlocutors had little to say about his work.

Following Aristotle's initial averment that man was the most mimetic of creatures, Jousse defined behavior, such as the girl's play of a dog described above, as *mimisme interactionnel*. Interactive, because in human bodily expression he determined a fluidity between agent, act, and the object acted-upon («Mimisme triphasées: l'agent, l'agissant, et l'agi»; Jousse 1974: 47). Humans incessantly receive, register, and replay what he called *mimèmes*, amassed through the receptive mechanisms of the human body. Because reality was ultimately inaccessible, Jousse had it, humans were dependent on this ability to interiorize. Throughout his work, Jousse deploys the word *intussusceptionner* to account for this continual work of corporeal integration. *Intussusceptionner* describes the movement of making internal to the self. It is taken from the domain of cellular biology to account for the way cells incorporate external materials (alternatively, in physiology the term denotes phenomena of intestinal invagination).

For Jousse, to know an object means to integrate it via *intussusception*, which is prior to mental activity whether it concerns idea, concept, image, or model. It is through incorporating reality via mimesis, by replaying what the real has inflicted on the body, that man himself becomes modeled by what he called *le réel*. Humans become possessed by a reality that incessantly invades them:

---

4 The condition of *echopraxia*, for example, is defined as a reactive compulsive need to repeat and imitate something.

»A ces profondeurs-là, l'homme est tout entier intuitivement envahi et modelé par le réel. Il est comme possédé par son envahisseur qu'il exprime et balance selon la structure de son organisme. Le Mimeur devient en quelque sorte l'être mimé et connu dans ses gestes et il en fait comme une nouvelle incarnation« (Jousse 1974: 55).<sup>5</sup>

Jousse dismissed a reductive understanding of mimetic behavior as mere execution of images located in the mind, which become externalized. In his understanding, *mimisme*, or miming, is not the same as to mimic or to imitate.<sup>6</sup> The problem with conceptualizing the girl's physical rendering of a dog as manifestation of an image is that her movements are then reduced to a conscious, agentive, and finite form: the dog suggested in her movements appears as a complete thing in itself – a Platonic *idea* which she acted out on the beach. She engaged in an instrumental action, the aim of which was to portray a dog. We are usually satisfied with such abbreviated explanations because the image or idea of a dog exists also in the mind of the observer, that is, in us. By observing *her* act, I come to recognize the dog that *she* plays. The girl and I come to share in an image and by extension, in the idea suggested. Hence, the conclusion goes, the idea or image of the dog lies at the origin of her behavior. In this way we confuse ›communication‹, the way we make sense of things and give meaning to what we perceive, with a more prior level of interaction: the way the world becomes integrated through the senses of the body (*intussusception*).

The dog that I recognize in her movements and that I can enunciate in speech or written discourse is not equal to her experience of motility. In reality, Jousse had it, the child's play is a creative and sensuous inquiry caused by prior mimetic dramas (*mimodrames*) and constantly generating new ones. It is not predicated on the *idea* of dog. The girl, by relinquishing herself to the moments intuited, comes to know herself in a novel incarnation. There is an element of possession at work in which the mimer becomes the being mimed. As Jousse had it, »le Mimeur devient [...] l'être mimé« (Jousse

5 »On this level, man is entirely invaded intuitively and modeled on the basis of the real. He is like possessed by his invader who expresses and balances him on the basis of the structure of his organism. The Mimer, in a way, becomes the being mimed and known in his gestures. He acts as if it were a new incarnation« [translation P.G.-F.).

6 Marcel Jousse juxtaposes *la Mimique* with *le Mimisme*, the former being an animal reaction, the latter a universal human characteristic (1974: 59-62). *La mimique* is a form of imitative behavior by the Anthropoid, while *mimisme* is what Anthropos does when engaging in mimetic replay by conquering the vital force of reality (61). Note that the girl, instead of playing a mere dog, could very well have played an actress playing a dog. She could have copied her classmate who told her that she once played a dog. She could have impersonated her father who under a spell was transformed miraculously into a dog; or played a cat that inhabits a dog; or a dog playing a girl (e.g. herself) who tries to move like a dog. Was she aping of dog trying to play a girl that moves like a girl, playing a dog? Or, a robot that moves like a four-legged animal? Her energetic performance contrasting to the slow and sluggish atmosphere of her surroundings, she perhaps sought a world that could confront the boring scene at the beach. The possibilities are sizable. On the level of bodily enervation, the separation of subject and object, or agent, act, and acted-upon, cannot be assumed to be as clearly defined as it tends to appear in written or spoken form.

1974: 55). It is, I believe, this aspect of her performance, the way she yielded repetitively to specific corporeal intuitions, that caught my attention and made me observe her with curiosity for a long while. I was able to see a level of absorption that suggested more than mere execution of finite forms. Ideas and images are things to which I have easy cognitive access. This girl, however, at least for the duration of her feverish play, was somewhere where I was not. While the dog displayed by her body did not seem in any way extraordinary, the girl she had become, definitely was.

For Jousse, to play and replay what gets to be understood as ›dog‹ through one's body is not the same as representing the animal in written form on paper in word or image. It is a somatic *interaction* in a register that is foundational but never equal to how language represents. The process is more elementary than a conception of mental appropriation or the exhibition of ideas. When we use words, we tend to lose the initial concreteness of the thing (*la chose*) that visited itself on the body. Through the distance of abstraction we gain the ability to transport, preserve, and share meaning – what we call ›communication‹. In mimetic replay, by contrast, it is the very concreteness of the thing that remains the object of exploration. The coherence of an object mimetically replayed can never be outright assumed, nor the coherence of the subject engaging in the activity of physical integration. The subject loses itself in the act: it becomes absorbed and an object to larger forces at work. The directionality of the forces that affect the body are hard to determine because its point of departure is blurred. It is obfuscated because the tool by which we describe this experience, language, is based on specific metaphysical assumptions. The coherence and boundedness of an idea as posed in language can only be achieved in the domain of words, writing, and thought, which are a distance removed from the corporeal play of *mimisme*. It is only in the domain of language that we come to speak confidently of a subject and an object ordered by a conventional syntax: *a girl is playing a dog*.

On closer inspection, in the little drama described above, it never becomes entirely clear who is the object and who is the subject in the flow of action. Is the girl *playing* a dog, or indeed, is the girl played *by* a dog? Mimetic interactivity furiously oscillates actor, act, and acted-upon (›jeu triphasées de l'agent, l'agissant, et l'agi‹).<sup>7</sup> Says Jousse:

---

7 For Marcel Jousse, the cardinal sin of French civilization is to have equated writing (*style écrit*) with civilization (1974: 33). It is through the mysterious, while apparently irresistible, human tendency to stereotype gestures into a formalism that human expression became pushed from the concrete to what he refers to as *l'algébrisme*; and from there to the negative quality of *l'algébrosisme* of the current age. The latter is a form of necrotic petrification caused by a Greco-Latin heritage that has become distorted by eliding the elementary foundation of all human expression in mimetic play: in the meaning of concepts, proverbs, ideas, images, words, narratives, memories. This so-called civilization has become obsessed with what he calls *graphisme* in a *livresque* environment in which things (*choses*) can no longer speak and are no longer heard (Jousse 1974: 74, 82, and 109-112). In order to counter the metaphysical baggage of Cartesianism, he introduced a plethora of terms, complex and mutually imbricated such as *mimage* and *mimodrame*, which have a tendency to become too frequent in his prose. By applying this complex terminology, Jousse apparently sought to defamiliarize the reader with talking, reciting, playing, writing, reading, acting and other quotidian activities, while simultaneously accounting for the hidden but ubiquitous mimetic behavior of the Anthropos underlying all of these.

»L'Homme normal est joué par le Réel qui se réverbère en lui« (1974: 58).<sup>8</sup> Hence, the girl, by integrating what addresses her corporally as part of the world to which she belongs, herself becomes object to that world played by the vital forces within it (i.e. »joué par le Réel«, as Jousse put it).<sup>9</sup> It is indispensable, then, that in conceptualizing human mimetic activity, we account for the metaphysical distortion that the application of words and concepts, derived from a domain removed from bodily experience, ultimately tend to engender. The corporeal dimension of experience is not of the same as the order of language, which organizes experience into disciplined articulation: syntax, narrative, classification, discourse. In these representations, the real that reverberates inside the body, cannot easily be accounted for. Jousse assumed that children, as well as societies not yet marred by a Greco-Latin influence or living under the cultural domination of the written form, offered cogent examples for a more »spontaneous« relation to the way reality undergoes intussusception by the human body. Jousse believed that French education in its civilizing mission took away the ability of children to relate mimetically to the world: (»L'enfant sage est l'enfant immobile« (1974: 74).<sup>10</sup> The same logic that reduces the mimetic drama to a *girl is playing a dog* might interpret a permanent absorption in that activity as a *girl has lost her mind*.

Notwithstanding the spirited way in which Marcel Jousse developed his arguments, there is much that remains unclear. How are experiences that do not become articulated in language, and thus not expressed through ideas, present to the perceptual apparatus of the human body, its sensorium? How is the perception of the world structured by images; and what distinguishes an image from an idea? Young children, as well as other organisms, engage in mimetic behavior without having any access to language or even prior to its acquisition. By consequence, it is correct to say that one cannot confidently speak of »ideas« at work. Images, on the other hand, seem to precede the acquisition of language. In visual perception light falls onto the retina of the eye and is registered without necessarily passing through those parts of the brain identified with linguistic function. People usually classified as »blind« have been shown to actually »see« through detailed images, even if lacking color, when moving through structured space.

The Viennese-born British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein argued that young infants *fantasize* the mother's breast through imaginative thinking whenever it is absent (Klein 1937: 308). Confronted with the need to cognize or feel a separation, internal objects are created when dealing with the world. These objects attempt to capture feelings but also images. Are not hallucinations readily transported by images? The French psychoana-

8 »Ordinary man is played by the Real which reverberates within him« [translation P.G.-F.]. It remains open to conjecture what Jousse exactly meant by »ordinary man« (»l'homme normale«), but most likely man unencumbered by *graphisme*, *algébrisme* and *algébrosisme*.

9 The three arenas that provided Jousse with most of his insights were the spontaneous mimetic play of young children (*laboratoire du foyer maternel*), societies considered more attuned with bodily impression and expression (*laboratoire des peuples spontanés*), and clinical psychiatry (*laboratoire tragique des cliniques psychiatrique*).

10 »The well-behaved child is the immobile child«, because *sage* (here meaning well-behaved) presupposes education, discipline, and civilization curtailing the work of intussusception.

lyst Jacques Lacan suggested a mirror-stage as a vital period for the development of the human child. In this early stage, determined by the particularly pronounced pre-maturation in human infants, the young child comes to identify with an external image in the field of vision. Unlike monkeys, who soon find this game of mimicry utterly useless, the human child »[...] playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates – namely, the child's own body, and the persons and even things around him« (Lacan 2002 [1966]: 3). There is a transformation that takes place when the subject is captured by an image, a vital-one, which allows the child to establish *mastery* over the body and overcome the fragmentary nature of early corporeal experience. The developmental accomplishment, however, is not reached through proper integration of what Jousse called *le réel*, but through relating to a *specular* image. The specular emphasizes the visual field that underlies all later captivation by images. In order to master the body, the child must mis-recognize itself in the movements of an external object. Identification with an image explains the later need to symbolize the permanence of the *I*, the ego. The center of this *I* remains blurred, marred by an alienating core, the initial moment of mis-recognition of the self that the specular image engendered. In that sense the subject remains *possessed*.

It is unlikely that children in non-literate societies, those that Jousse considered »spontanées«, even when fundamentally different than our own, are entirely occluded from such early forms of social inscription. Yet, what remains internal and external to an emerging *I*, the relation to temporality or permanence, does remain a question open to ethnographic investigation. It appears that by not offering precise definitions of what constitutes ›idea‹, and by too narrow a definition of what is understood by ›image‹ and ›writing‹, Marcel Jousse's formulations remain limited and beg the question. It is exactly when we initially confront ›reality‹ that the work of imagination becomes permanently inscribed in our psyche. This is so because the experience of what is considered real includes a libidinal attachment to objects, that is, an organization of what becomes internal or external to the entity that eventually ends up delineating the ›I‹. In sum, the way bodily integrity was initially established is inseparable from an imaginary relation to the mother's body. Only much later do these experiences in their elements become organized and expressed in language, which, pace Lacan, introduces desire and lack.

## The shimmering of a heat haze: images of *passiones*

Godfrey Lienhardt, a British ethnographer who worked for two years among the Dinka pastoralists of Southern Sudan, described a very different situation than that of the girl on the beach described at the beginning of this paper. According to him, at the time of his field research in the late 1940s, the Dinka had no conception of mind as an entity that stores up experiences which later are recalled as traces. There is, in Dinka understanding, no automatic reliance on a mediating space between the experiencing self and exterior influences acting directly upon that self at any given moment. The world and the psyche are not separate in a way that would make such interpretations significant



(Lienhardt 1961: 149-150). While the Dinka had an understanding of themselves as active, self-assertive, inquiring, and acquisitive, they characterized agency differently when it confronted experiences of death and suffering (Lienhardt 1961: 53). The mechanism by which the Dinka frequently interpreted said afflictions provided an understanding, where the agents responsible were not necessarily located in the acting person. Instead of a conception of mind, the Dinka had a flexible understanding of various forces called *nhialic*, *atiep*, *jok*, or *yath*. Lienhardt loosely translated these forces as ›Powers‹ for lack of a better English term. These ultra-human forces, ›Powers‹, while significantly different in quality from humans, co-inhabited the physical and social world of the Dinka. They could become located within individuals but were also found in the sky or appeared in various objects and animals.<sup>11</sup>

While the Dinka's conceptualization of the phenomenal world was not limited to a play of such forces, they frequently interpreted particular experiences as caused by them (Lienhardt 1961: 148). Some of these forces, such as ›clan-divinities‹ (*yath*), were fundamentally tied to conceptions of what we might call kinship. They were named after various animals (e.g. hedgehog), weather conditions (e.g. rain, thunder), substances (e.g. quivering meat, excrement), diseases (e.g. smallpox), body parts (e.g. thighbone), quotidian activities (e.g. sweeping), and other implements or aspects in Dinka life without any strict limitation or rule as to what could be included and what could not (Lienhardt 1961: 104-146). ›Clan-divinities‹ were inherited by an ancestor. When the ethnographer asked what he himself should invoke as his own clan-divinity, he was told, only half-jokingly: »Typewriter, Paper, and Lorry«. In the Dinka view, these items represented the qualities and abilities of the ethnographer's own agnatic descent (Lienhardt 1961: 110).

›Free-divinities‹, by contrast, were associated more readily with nature. While both ›clan‹ and ›free-divinities‹ were considered related to humans beings, the latter frequently forced this relation upon individual Dinka (Lienhardt 1961: 104). Mostly considered formless, ›free-divinities‹ were representable through emblems, color, and other associations. They never appeared directly but manifested themselves in the behaviors of men causing illness and possession (Lienhardt 1961: 80-81). They also spoke through the mouth of the afflicted making various requests (Lienhardt 1961: 57). Addressed in hymns circulating in Dinka territory and sung at various occasions, one ›free-divinity‹ was considered anti-social and needed to be ritually expiated. Finally there was a third category called simply ›Divinity‹ (*nhialic*), a universal entity known by many different names. While ›Divinity‹ was associated with the former two forces, it could be assimilated to conceptions of other people's divinities such as the Nuer *Kwoth*, the Muslim *Allah*, or the Christian *God* (Lienhardt 1961: 57).

Lienhardt saw the basis for Dinka conceptualizations of ›Powers‹ in a particular configuration of human experience tied to how the phenomenal world was manifestly perceived. It was in concrete and direct *encounters* that ›Powers‹ were made vividly present to the Dinka. Dismissing scholarly interpretations that sought to define a par-

---

11 It is important to note the fluidity of these conceptions and to resist misconstruing them as part of a systematic Dinka eschatology. According to Lienhardt, the Dinka showed little interest to elaborate intrinsic qualities or relations between ›Powers‹.

ticular ›creed‹ or to systematize a ›pantheon of Powers‹, Lienhardt insisted that Dinka religion began with experience of the natural and social world. Especially in relation to clan-divinities, the Dinka confronted a correspondence between experience and various ›Powers‹ (Lienhardt 1961: 96-97). Lienhardt offered the example of Ajak, a troubled Dinka youth, falling possessed by a ›free-divinity‹ several times during the ethnographer's presence. During possession, Ajak's movements did not resemble anything an observer could easily recognize as the image of an animal. The contours of a finite object did not appear. Rather, his were chaotic movements, suggesting a loss of control over the motor functions of the body, dissociation and danger. In the Dinka conception ›Powers‹ seize (*dom*) and wake-up (*pac*) in human bodies. They appear in them »like the shimmering of a heat-haze« (Lienhardt 1961: 58). The audience of the performance addressed the afflicted as a ›Power‹ and understood his behavior as expression of the entity's will. Yet, exactly which ›Power‹ had seized him was initially unclear and had to be established through the probing labor of diviners. There was no conception of *mind* here, that Ajak, whether momentarily or for a longer period of time, could have lost.

In one of the quintessential passages of the monograph, in order to find an analytical term that could be juxtaposed to individual agentive action, Lienhardt introduced the word *passiones*. As in the older employment of the English word ›passions‹, Dinka ›Powers‹ were the ›images of human *passiones* seen as the active sources of those *passiones*« (Lienhardt 1961: 151). ›Powers‹ caused people to become ill, experience sickness, and fall into bouts of possession in particular moments of affliction. Their names and demands were matters to be discovered and revealed through the help of religious specialists. Active forces became ›imaged‹ through reference to various ›Powers‹. Lienhardt explicitly preferred the verb ›to image‹ in lieu of the verb ›to represent‹ (Lienhardt 1961: 147), I suspect, to bring home the fact that ›imaging‹ was not simply a form of mental activity, the execution of an idea. Once articulated as ›Powers‹, these forces became available to ritual action. When a ›Power‹ had entered a particular medium, the afflicted was understood to be that ›Power‹ – an identification similar to that in Dinka sacrifice. Afflictions usually resulted from moral neglect, having missed the opportunity to show avoidance or respect (both rendered as *thek* in Dinka language). In the case of Ajak, for example, possession was preceded by the sudden death of his father to whom he had held a troubled relationship since birth (Lienhardt 1961: 57-63). On previous occasions, his father's ghost had seized him, tried to injure him, and had also appeared in his dreams (Lienhardt 1961: 60). During possession, however, it was the ›free-divinity‹ Macardit (›the great black one‹) who had become present in the young man's body and tried to seriously harm him by leading the youth to a crocodile infested river during trance (Lienhardt 1961: 61-62). Lienhardt elaborated how the symbolic mechanism of ritual, which included the frequent arrangements of animal sacrifices, were means by which the Dinka coped with ›Powers‹. In this way the Dinka were able to manipulate their own experiences of the phenomenal world to which these forces, and their various effects, fundamentally belonged.

In sum, for the Dinka the agent of affliction is not conceptualized in the mind, but in certain forces that can seize a body and needed to be properly named, addressed, controlled and propitiated. The labor of identification of this force at hand was performed by other members of society, not the afflicted themselves. Had the girl on the beach de-

scribed above been a Dinka of Southern Sudan in the 1940s, it is possible that repeated renditions of a dog in such high quality might have predisposed her. Such spirited displays might have become understood as a sign of invisible forces at work, a foreign will that made itself present. To me the girl's rendition seemed to suggest a dog in a straightforward manner, while Ajak's physical contortions remained an object of interpretation involving other community members. Lienhardt's descriptions are homologous, but not equal to Jousse's formulations of invasion and possession. Significantly, Lienhardt pointed out that he never saw children considered possessed among the Dinka (Lienhardt 1961: 59). By consequence, it is hard to follow Jousse's attempt to delink corporeal mimetic play from cultural content: images, dreams, hymns, color symbolism. The Dinka were not *peuples spontanés* and, however flexible the organization of their experience, ideas about the world did seem to play a vital role in the way they conceptualized bodily afflictions in correspondence with various ›Powers‹.

What remains important is that Dinka interpretation did not need to presuppose ›mind‹ as a mediator between subject and object to make sense of what effects the body. Bodies were invaded by forces foreign to them. These forces were imaged as ›Powers‹ and confronted in ritual. For Western-educated readers, the girl on the beach was under the influence of an image. With Lienhardt's Dinka one could interpret this image as an entity, an actual subject in the world imaged as *dog-on-a-leash*. But then, of course, the girl was not a Dinka and the Dinka do not usually sunbathe on Greek islands.

## Ecstatic mimesis

One of the more spectacular examples of an external address that becomes mimetically replayed in the body comes from the ethnography of Elizabeth Colson published in the late 1960s (1969: 69-103), based on fieldwork from the mid 1950s. Colson, an US-American anthropologist, worked among the Tonga of Northern Rhodesia, later Zambia. For several decades, she was confronted with an array of spirit possession cults that by the 1940s had partly disappeared among Plateau Tonga but were active from the 1950s into the mid 1960s among the Valley Tonga of Gwembe district among whom she also worked. In possession dances called *masabe*, female Valley Tonga sought to impersonate and represent unprecedented figures of authority, various novel objects, or surprising machinery that caught their attention. Colson offered a secondhand account of a woman who upon seeing an airplane flying over her village spontaneously fell into a sort of swoon. The incident occurred around 1954, a decade before Independence from the British. The woman became possessed by Airplane spirit:

»Dazed she fled to the bush, and had to be brought back to the village. She learned the demands of the spirit either in vision or in dreams: drum rhythms, songs, dance steps, the drama incorporated in phases of the dance, the articles desired by the spirit, and the plants required for treatment. At the first Airplane dance she was both patient and instructor, teaching drummers, chorus and attendants. After this the dance spread to other people, first in her own village and neighborhood and then to others

in the same vicinage, flowing along the path she had made. Some were possessed when planes flew over but apparently received no new revelations that radically altered the form of the dance.» (Colson 1969: 79).

The remarkable passage describes the first Valley Tonga entered by Airplane spirit. We do not know whether this woman saw an airplane for the first time, nor can we be sure what exactly captured her attention causing so violently a reaction. Was it a specific aspect of the airplane's outward appearance? The smooth metallic surface, the little dotted windows, the wide embrace of its wings, the elongated body? Was it the color or the smell, the fumes such machinery inevitably emits? Or the echoing noise it made in the sky while gliding weightlessly in an unfamiliar type of movement, a stiff pushing through clouds? The breeze it left on her face? The sight of an airplane can be many things. Unlike that woman, I am relatively numb to the experience of an airplane. It is very familiar to me. I seem to have a definite idea of it, as well as an image, which perhaps explains why it has become difficult for me to experience its concreteness. As Jousse would point out, the thing (*la chose*) no longer speaks to me and I can no longer hear it. A child may possibly be deeply emotionally stirred by the initial perception of an airplane. But it is unlikely the child would fall ill from apperceiving it.<sup>12</sup> And in any case, the Tonga woman was no child. What is important in this passage is rather that the plane was the occasion for the experience of a third that interjected itself between the woman and the airplane, namely what Colson for lack of a better term was forced to translate as ›spirit‹. The woman was not possessed by an airplane, but by a spirit called Airplane. Similar to Lienhardt's reflections on Dinka ›Powers‹, it is the nature and quality of this ›spirit‹ that usually completely escapes us when we try to understand such apperceptions.

The Valley Tonga called possession dances by the same name as the spirits that caused them. Airplane spirit – called *indeki* in the language of the Tonga – was a *masabe* spirit that caused Airplane dance. Following first-time possession, Tonga diviners suspected that others who dreamt of airplanes or became unwell were equally affected by the new entity and the condition it caused. If the new treatment offered relief, it confirmed the spirit's presence and the medical imperative to arrange ceremonial dances. In these productions the Tonga enacted mimetically what possessed them in dance with costumes and dramatic performance. Thus while Airplane dance was standardized by the first

---

12 It is very unfortunate that I can no longer remember the moment when I first saw an airplane or became aware of its defining behaviors: a machine that moves across skies transporting goods and passengers. The oldest memory I have of flying in such a device is rather thin, a trace from when I was four years old. By that time I must have already flown several times before. On my first conscious flight, I was alone and cared for by a kind ›stewardess‹ (as ›flight attendants‹ used to be called). I remember her as very pretty. While I enjoyed her proximity, I have forgotten the contours of her face. The plane flew from Montréal (Canada) to Frankfurt (West Germany) as was explained to me much later. I do not remember being terrified during takeoff or landing, but only concerned by the absence of my proper parents, which seemed to give the experience an existential twist. It is entirely possible, however, that such fragmented memory traces hide more than they reveal of the initial experience at the time. Heaven knows what lies buried beneath an initial experience of flying and levitation, which began long ago in fantasy.

woman possessed, the spirit impelled other patients to move in the same characteristic style and confirm its presence. This particular dance, which radiated out of the Valley, in Chipepo, turned out to be highly contagious.

*Masabe* spirits were new arrivals on the local dance scene. They had appeared within living memory of those Tonga with whom Colson worked over several decades.<sup>13</sup> Most Tonga understood the *masabe* to have originated from Shona speaking areas of Rhodesia (the Tonga word *masabe* probably derived from the Shona word *mashave*). They were alien spirits. Jesuit missionaries mentioned the introduction of such new spirit phenomena explicitly in 1918 (Colson 1969: 94). Apparently, they emerged as a reaction to the introduction of the police and administrative post of the British colonial government, Christian missions, the railway, and the first European settlers. Most importantly, they afflicted mostly women and not men, the latter who worked as migrant laborers in the cities while leaving the former behind in the villages. They caused the afflicted to fall ill, have recurrent dreams, feel sadness or apathy.<sup>14</sup> Older Tonga possession dances resembling the *masabe* newcomers had primarily been the domain of male hunters and had involved dance imitation of animals (Colson 1969: 94-96).<sup>15</sup>

---

13 Colson speaks of several varieties of possession among the Tonga associated with different classes of spirits of which only some have respective mediums. Spirits were *luwo* (wind) or *muuya* (air or breath), because they were invisible and the Tonga knew them only by what they did. *Basangu* spirits were associated with community welfare and were the most prominent ones while also the rarest. They caused a solitary possession demanding the medium (also called *basangu* or 'prophet') to face and pronounce demands to the public as intermediaries between the world of the living and the world of spirits. Ignoring its demands had consequences for Tonga society in general (*basangu* were mainly associated with weather). By contrast, the *masabe* spirits caused a more associative form of possession afflicting an individual medium spontaneously through sudden contact. This form of possession was more common at the time of her field work. Through the medium the spirit expressed its own desires and essential nature only to the person possessed. Failure to comply with the *masabe* spirit's demand had consequence for the medium only. *Masabe* possession had public aspects only insofar as it involved elaborate dance treatments and ceremonies involving others in their performance. The third type of possession knew no medium and was wholly undesirable. It concerned ghosts of forgotten dead or spirit entities that were manipulated by sorcerers to enter a victim for the purpose of killing. Finally there were *mizimu*, ancestral spirits, who caused no possession in the living at all. Colson speculated that Tonga spirits might also be understood as forming one single class differentiated merely by the way they impinged upon the lives of men (Colson 1969: 69-103, esp. 70-72).

14 The illnesses Colson listed, with the exception of oppressive dreams, seemed to have no direct association with the particular spirit: eye, tooth, and ear infection, concussion, swollen breasts, mental disturbance after childbirth, and many others (Colson 1969: 82).

15 In many societies, hunters are mediators of the symbolic space between culture and wilderness (Kramer 1987: 24-29, esp. 27). Their liminal positions are expressed in the formation of separate communities, taboos, and other special cultic arrangements. This position is predicated on their topographical knowledge of the space beyond cultivated settlements of society, where they not seldom make contact with foreigners and other strange things afar. Although some of Kramer's work has been translated into English, I will refer to the German originals in the following elaborations.

What is spirit here? *Masabe* are anonymous spirits and unlike other types of Tonga spirits have no individual names. When they are understood to be of human origin *masabe* represent alien humanity known only by tribal and not by personal names (Colson 1969: 71). *Indeki*, Airplane spirit, is not the name of an individual airplane, nor its individual spirit as in what anthropologists used to call ›animism‹. Rather, it is the spirit of a class of phenomena called Airplane, and as such neither equal to a particular airplane, nor entirely divorced from association with it. The word that translates into ›spirit‹, here, is *muuya*, which Colson renders as breath or air, the essence that endows a phenomenon with its essential nature. »There is something which projects itself into humans and makes them behave in characteristic fashion, and this is called *muuya*« (Colson 1969: 72-73). Every single *muuya* is the essence of a class of phenomena which become manifest in each individual specimen of that class. These classes of phenomena include people and animals, but also tractors, trains, motorboats and airplanes, as they display the capability of independent motion. It can flow out of one specimen and enter a person displacing the *muuya* already present. The affected then assume its characteristic *Gestalt* as in *masabe* possession dances (Kramer 1987: 71).

*Masabe* spirits entered people without their volition making them ill with various maladies and ailments forcing them to dance (Colson 1969: 72). The medium was considered a vehicle of the spirit's desires expressing its nature. It was addressed as *masabe* during active possession: a woman possessed by the spirit Airplane became *Indeki*, Airplane, and behaved accordingly. Once afflicted, the possessed were expected to engage in a sequence of three dance ceremonies in which neighbors and kin participated. Each event became more elaborate than the former. It involved dancing, costume, medicines, ceremonial forms of address as well as gifts such as soap and a feast of chicken paid by the kin of the medium who were obliged to function as hosts to the dance spectacle. Colson stressed that it remained unclear who exactly received these gifts, whether the spirit or its medium (Colson 1969: 76). Tobacco had to be provided to drummers and other dancers (Colson 1969: 86). During inactive periods, the spirit was believed to reside nearby or on the surface of the vehicle's body and remained ignored. Thus in normal life the medium received no special treatment for her condition and close association with the spirit.

Note that the form of possession, i.e. dance, was at once proof of affliction, part of a treatment, and mechanism of the cure. The latter was not reached by exorcizing the possessing agent, as was the case with *Ajak* among the Dinka. Rather the afflicted identified in a controlled manner with the respective spirit, indicated through a wrist band of colorful beads that marked the medium permanently with that spirit (Colson 1969: 89). Failure to address the demands of the spirit had consequences for the afflicted alone, not for society at large, unlike with other Tonga spirits. »Full recovery gave the final proof that Airplane spirit had been seeking to express itself through the patient who had now learned to cope with it«, Colson had it (1969: 80). If the spirit departed altogether, the medium was said to become *tontolo*, that is, cool (Colson 1969: 70).

Colson offered a surprising list of *masabe* possession dances and the spirits that caused them. While older dances had mostly involved animals of the bush, some of which were unambiguously dangerous, or alien tribes including for example the *Mazungu* (the spirit of the Europeans), newer dances involved more recent experiences:

the *Mapolis* (the police), *Matingatinga* (the carrier), *Matobela Injanji* (railroad followers), *Maregimenti* (soldiers). New inexplicable equipment, too, were personified in dance possession such as *Citima* (train), *Incinga* (bicycle), *Kanamenda* (motorboat), *Siacilipwe* (bush clearer), *Kandimu* (boat engine). Finally, Colson mentions possession by *Madance* (European dancing) or novel spirits such as the *Mangelo* (the Angel) which variously afflicted and entered Tonga mediums (Colson 1969: 83-84).

At times, *masabe* dance possessions were extremely contagious. Each dance had a typical, recurrent, diagnostic dream imagery. The Airplane vehicle, for example, dreamt to be carried to the sky by an airplane and was then thrown into water (Colson 1969: 85). The mechanism of contagion was enhanced by the fact that the affliction accrued could be passed onto others. Frequently the phrase »Perhaps you wish to dance...« was used as a veritable threat of affliction with the new condition. The ability to send a spirit to others made *masabe* possession akin to a minor sorcery rite as it implied illness for the recipient. The person who directed the *masabe* to another was explicitly named in the second ceremonial dance event and received gifts by the medium's kin. Colson pointed out, that the alleged senders never bothered contradicting the accusation of having sent the affliction, that is, to have caused the compulsion to dance. The sending of dance affliction, while not necessarily a benign act, was generally accepted even if it could imply a certain amount of malice. The practice gave expression to daily conflicts and various tensions between neighbors, friends, and kin. Often, a dance followed a period of quarrel between spouses and easily possessed dancers were considered more volatile characters, quickly excited over daily trifles (Colson 1969: 81).

Some *masabe*, like Airplane, spread like a flue virus and swept the Valley at a time of heightened turmoil for the Tonga, while others did not (Colson 1969: 90-94; Kramer 1987: 123). »Each person possessed becomes a possible focus for the further spread of the dance; each dance performance is an occasion for instructing onlookers in what is expected of the one possessed by this spirit« (Colson 1969: 80). In other words, the dance ceremonies, part of the cure, were themselves contagious for those who participated. Even after the cure, a formerly afflicted could occasionally become possessed whenever an urge to move in the characteristic style emerged. Dancing could be so impressive, that onlookers became spontaneously possessed without having a history of the disease at all (Colson 1969: 82). As a matter of fact, the most spectacular forms of dance that Colson witnessed took place not in the curing ceremonies mentioned, but in alternative occasions for entertainment. In these social events, individuals improvised and, again, onlookers would sometimes become possessed by *masabe* (Colson 1969: 88). All of these dances were occasions for women to obtain favorable recognition for their artistic talents (Colson 1969: 90) and sending affliction to others could be a strategy of dancers to create an audience for the display of their individual skill (Colson 1969: 94).

*Masabe* dance possession was an exhausting exercise and could cause bruising or injury. It often included a rapid shuffle, falling to the ground, shaking of body parts, moving at incredible speeds, and always culminated in a violent climax. The hyperkinesis was an indication of the severity of the possession. The performances that Colson witnessed in the 1960s were truly impressive: Airplane was dressed in black leg rattles and wore a black male hat. The movements switched from representing a whirling propeller to a

district officer arriving by plane to hold a village meeting.<sup>16</sup> The medium, or the spirit, was given water and scented soap to wash, a highly desired item and associated unambiguously with the Europeans and life in the cities. The motorboat medium, by contrast, was doused with water and rolled in the mud on the ground. Again, scented soap was demanded. Bush clearer was covered in motor oil and was dragging a metal chain behind her carving its way a machine might clear a path through the bush. Elephant was on all fours swinging her body sideways. A veritable epidemic of *Madance*, European dance, broke out in a girl's boarding schools in 1962, in which girl after girl fell violently possessed and demanded soapy water to drink in order to perfume their bodies internally in the way of Westerners (Colson 1969: 92). The sounds the possessed made, too, simulated the respective spirits:

»Those who have animal *masabe* imitate the call of the animal; Train dancers whistle and clank like a locomotive; Police dancers use a whistle to give drill orders; Foreign dancers speak in the language of their spirit's homeland. Other dancers may need only to use a falsetto when they call out or address an onlooker« (Colson 1969: 87).

Colson also described the physical onset of possession:

»Those who have been possessed speak of a preliminary tingling in their limbs, the rapid beat of the pulse and the throbbing of the heart. Then comes blackness just before they lose consciousness in the trance, at which point they fall, the body completely rigid as it drops. Onlookers call out that the person is dead or unconscious, medicine is given, the spirit then emerges in control [having arisen, P.G.-F.]. Finally it departs and the dancer returns to normal« (Colson 1969: 82).

How can we understand these productions? What started with an external address moved inwards, into the body as affliction, and became external again through dance, which as cure involved other parts of the community: the way neighbors and spouses, kin and friends, address, oppose, and cooperate with one another. These performances appear like occasions to symbolize, occasions that allow relenting to the compulsion to dance, to move the body. They give expression to aesthetic and visceral experiences that are exactly not elaborated discursively, but mimetically through movement (whirling, pulling, swaying, rotating arms) in combination with sound (drum, whistling, foreign tongues, falsetto voice), smells (soap) and dress (oil on skin, black hat, leg rattles). All seems to be bent bringing about, lending expression, to something that compels imitation, a likeness to an image that made an impression in the possessed. But if these are indeed images, they are not acted upon. Rather, the subject feels acted upon *by* them. That is why Colson called these productions ›dance *possession*‹ [emphasis mine, P.G.-F.] and insists to translate her material as cases of illness, disease, affliction. The passivity of

---

16 It seems, then, what captured the attention of the first Airplane dancer who standardized these movements were the rotating propeller attached to the plane, and those strange fellows with head gear, stepping in and out of a pulsating vehicle.



reception is contradicted by a *creativity* of performance, one that includes recognition of individual skill and agentive action. It becomes elaborated, routinized and appropriated by others. The dances are contagious and unfold further along the lines of curing rituals and entertainment spectacles.

As in the case of the Dinka, we are confronted with an effect of the real on the body of the afflicted. This ›real‹, however, is not the same as ours; nor is there an immediate similarity between Dinka and Tonga conceptions. The phenomenal world – the things that impress themselves on the body through incorporation, intussusception, or integration – are pre-structured by the way the world and the elements within it become sensually perceived and interpreted. While we are far off from the girl enacting *dog-on-a-leash* on a Greek island, *masabe* dance possession among the Tonga involves yielding to a powerful impression, one that seems to have overwhelmed the afflicted, resulting in the mobilization of all the senses of the body and all social relations of the group. In these spectacular performances, it is the surface quality of an unfamiliar thing, such as an airplane, that becomes the object of exploration and mimetic play. Note that the first encounter with the object brought forth various images that become repeated in dreams and visions, surpassing and supplementing what was initially apperceived. Those becoming possessed do not necessarily need to perceive an actual airplane but become afflicted by a contagious image that details concrete aspects of the impressive object. In this play, more than a mere likeness is produced between an unfamiliar object and an afflicted subject, while the separation between subject and object appears confused in the special state of consciousness we usually call ›possession‹.

While the girl's play of a dog defines a temporary obsession with unusual bodily motility, we do not know if she had earlier dreamt of a dog or was haunted by an image before she enacted her play on the beach. Her imitation defined the contours of an object that seemed transparent to me. Even if one were to agree with Jousse that no image preceded corporeal integration (*intussusception*), her concrete incarnation will undoubtedly provide her with a more complete understanding of what it means to be a dog on the beach. In the Dinka example, by contrast, an affliction presents an invasion by invisible forces that make themselves felt through various symptoms, including possession. These symptoms imply a decisive loss of control through contact with an array of forces to which the Dinka have indirect access and of which they only have a limited understanding. The Dinka cope with these afflictions through sacrifice, inclusive of expiation, exorcism, as well as mechanisms of identification and substitution. In the Tonga example, finally, we have an affliction triggered by something sensuously perceived on the surface of a new and unfamiliar object in the world. The response of the Tonga is a permanent identification with the afflicting agent, relenting individually, until it becomes cooled (*tontolo*), i.e. until the compulsion to dance in a particular way has ended or is replaced by a novel affliction. While undeniably aesthetic and explorative, it is hard to interpret dance possessions as providing the Tonga with an effective means to know and control the forces that possess them. Nor does it seem correct to view the Tonga as entirely dominated by what is external to them. The *masabe* become incorporated into elaborate curing and entertainment ceremonies in which neighbors rival one another's skills, gifts are exchanged, and social relationships are renewed.

## Realism and mimesis

The German anthropologist Fritz W. Kramer understands performances such as Tonga dance possession, in which various novel machinery become objects of mimetic replay, to be founded on the *Macht des Anschaulichen*: »the power of the manifest« or »the power of what is seen« (Kramer 1987: 63-69). What is perceived overwhelms experience through its lucidity, concreteness, visibility and tangibility. Ecstatic mimesis, such as Tonga dance possession, involves pronouncedly the field of vision.<sup>17</sup> It focuses attention on one or several aspects of a particular object by elaborating on the perceived surface quality of things: the red fez, a feather, a hat, fork and knife; or in the Tonga case: soap, a black hat, a rotating propeller. The experience of being overwhelmed (*überwältigt*) is predicated on a gaze from outside allowing focus on the surface quality of things. Here, isolated detail is elevated to suggestive image with an autonomous force in the creation of figurines, spirit-possession, or curing rites. These details are the accoutrements of the stranger, the foreigner, the other to one's own culture, which become aesthetically explored in mimetic dramas (Kramer 1987: 7-11). Through mimetic play an object becomes separated from its original context and integrated into local practices: sculptures, masques, figurines, or dance performances, inclusive of the various ritual productions associated with them. This integration, however, expresses what is conceived as an *outside* to one's culture, delineating a domain of cultural otherness.

What had caused consternation or surprise is elaborated and made part of one's own cultural repertoire as *Fremdgeister* (Kramer 1983: 377-379). The object inducing mimetic replay causes an experience, rendering the subject no longer in control. African possession usually begins with illness, sadness and affliction. *Passiones* is a word that in meaning today is somewhat removed from the English word »passion« or, alternatively, from the German word *Leidenschaften*. According to Kramer, it describes a form of being acted-upon, for which the German language, roughly since the 17th century, no longer has a viable equivalent, except with reference to psychologically defined states (1987: 91-92). It describes an experience that used to be identified more frequently by various concepts such as *Ergriffenheit* (to be grasped by something), *Erfülltheit* (to be filled-up by

---

17 Ecstatic mimesis (*ekstatische Mimesis*) must be distinguished to other forms of African performance such as comedy theater. While these plays represent westernized locals or various strangers humorously, their reenactments differ from ecstatic mimesis. They imply comical and critical commentary, aspects that lack in trance and possession (Kramer 2005: 128). Ecstatic mimesis of the foreigner or the stranger usually occurs among marginal groups of society and in peripheral cults: among women, migrant laborers, and slaves. They concern the Zar of the Northeast, for example, or the Bori-, Hauka-, and Vodou-cults of West-Africa (2005: 130). Instead of comical representation, ecstatic mimesis include forms of dissociation and work on the basis of an economy of affect, which, like in traditional spirit possession, does not seek to integrate, but to ban the dangers confronted (133).

something), and *Besessenheit* (to be possessed by something).<sup>18</sup> *Passiones* describe »den inversen Aspekt des Handelns«, the inverse aspect of acting or the inverse aspect of agency (Kramer 1987: 64). If anthropologists have often rendered the agent at work as ›spirit‹ or ›force‹, the various vernacular meanings on which such translations were based should not be assumed unproblematic by mere academic convention. The impact of corporeal experience becomes collectively affirmed through such third terms. For the Tonga, *muuya* (breath) cannot be seen but is inferred by its effects and appears in dreams and can enter bodies (Kramer 1987: 71). It refers to what is essential and specific in a *class* of phenomena (das *Gattungsspezifische*) (Kramer 1987: 72). It is what caused affliction when it entered the possessed.

The confrontation with an exotic (*fremde*) reality, about whom there is little prior knowledge, isolates the secondary traits in order to seek out the hidden dimensions involved. It intensifies the aspects deemed strange in order to render them recognizable, albeit now in a monstrous way. The figure produced (*Nachbildung*) is incorporated exactly by remaining at a distance to it (Kramer 1987: 8-9). Unlike what Jousse claims for mimetic play, there is no direct integration (*intussusception*) at work because the distance between afflicted subject and the agent of affliction is sustained and not undone. Scientific knowledge production, by contrast, tends to tame the initial address of an unfamiliar thing by providing a context and mustering causes for its existence. By this mechanism, the unfamiliarity of the object in question becomes undone. In mimesis, on the other hand, the object becomes aesthetically explored and dramatized, exaggerated and isolated by integration into a new symbolic context that makes it independent from its origin. The result is frequently astonishing and often appears demonic. Such a gaze from outside can be negatively qualified as ›superficial‹ only if one insists that *knowing an object* necessitates overcoming its unfamiliar address through assimilation, i.e. the elimination of the object's otherness in a process of mental cognition that negates the initial experience of apperception (what psychoanalysis would refer to as *sekundäre Bearbeitung* – secondary revision). Instead of *Ergriffenheit*, one gets *Erklärung*; instead of being grasped by something, one provides an explanation thus arresting the unfamiliar quality of the object, the *primäre Erfahrung des Fremden* (Kramer 2005: 143).

Focusing on the surface quality of things can be understood as the opposite strategy: a keen interest in isolating that which caused consternation, for example, the very power that rendered someone possessed. By serving to signify the other to one's own culture, such an operation constitutes a form of artistic realism concerned with the immediate givens of experience: the concision and rhythm of the form perceived. The other, or the strange, is hence not assimilated, if we understand under that term the application of procedures of rational explanation (*Erklärung*) or understanding (*Verstehen*). Realist

---

18 Kramer is influenced here by an older generation of German anthropologists, sociologists, and psychiatrists, most of whom are poorly known in the anglophone world today. Compare various contributions in Jürgen Zutt's *Ergriffenheit und Besessenheit als kulturanthropologisches Problem*, such as Ernst Benz (1972: 125-148), W. E. Mühlmann (1972: 69-79) and Zutt himself (1972: 11-24); as well as the introductory commentary in another edited volume on the relation between sociology and anthropology by René König (1984: 17-35).

representations such as in Tonga dance performances are offered in a register that is akin to what constitutes the operation of *day-dreaming*, an exploration not yet made entirely coherent through secondary elaboration but faithful to the initial experience of address. It is these images that provided the material for three consecutive Tonga dance performances. Located somewhere between, but never equal to, what we usually understand as art, performance, dream work, ritual, possession, trance, theater, and figurative realism, such ›images of *passiones*‹, Kramer had it, take seriously the encounter with the other to one's own specific culture: »das Andere der jeweils eigenen Kultur« (Kramer 1987: 10).

From an anthropologist's perspective, which is securely locked within a scientific register, this imagery of the other is very much part of the society in which it becomes expressed, because it forms part of how that society conceptualizes its own externality. It forms part of its cosmology, which in many African societies traditionally implies a space beyond the confines of settled life, namely, the bush or the wilderness (Kramer 1987: 56-63). In Dinka society this opposition was expressed through the distinction between the wilds and the homestead – *roor* and *bai* (Lienhardt 1961: 63). What addressed the Tonga in various modern machinery like the airplane, was the wilderness from which the Europeans were seen to hail, similar to the ›free-divinities‹ of the Dinka (but not necessarily the ›clan-divinities‹ associated with ancestral kinship). It was into a culturally constituted outside into which the unfamiliar new machinery was integrated and thus remained to an important degree part of an unknown, but not entirely novel, domain of wilderness. In *masabe* dance possession, the unfamiliarity of what confronted the Tonga, never became assimilated into familiar forms of knowledge (*Sinnverstehen*), but mimetically played as an address from beyond.

For Kramer such mimetic representations are *realist* interpretations (1987: 8). Realism, following Erich Auerbach, is understood as the interpretation of reality (*Wirklichkeit*) through mimesis. In Auerbach, mimesis was understood as literary *Darstellung* or *Nachahmung* –representation or imitation (Auerbach 2001 [1946]: 515). Kramer introduced the term mimesis because he saw rational factors as *secondary* in mimetic behavior, especially in the context of dance possession:

»Im realistischen Roman geht es, wie in der afrikanischen Besessenheit, nicht um eine rationale Erkenntnis von Ordnungen und Zusammenhängen, wie etwa in der modernen Ethnographie, sondern um intuitiv erfaßte, suggestive Bilder, die den Autor, sei es des Textes oder des Tanzes, überwältigen« (Kramer 1987: 145-246).<sup>19</sup>

Mimetic behavior cannot be assimilated to forms of instrumental action even if it occurs in concrete contexts in which certain social and individual functions are easily identified (Kramer 1987: 239). Possession is experienced as a form of invasion or coercion (*Zwang*) and the afflicted do not understand their condition as purposeful action following a clear-

---

19 »In the realistic novel, as well as in African possession, the concern is not the rational understanding of the order of things and their interconnections, as it is for modern ethnography; rather at issue are intuitively apprehended, suggestive images, which overwhelm an author, be that an author of a text or the author of a dance« (translation P.G.-F.)

ly defined aim, nor as inherently useful activity. One is only possessed by what has no useful purpose, hailing from a domain from which one is excluded (Kramer 1987: 103). Possession is the opposite of conversion, which is predicated on assimilation. And yet, in the vibrant productions described above, a creative labor is clearly perceivable. In the European tradition, however, there is only one concept that does not pose a contradiction between creativity, associated with *Kunst* (art) and possession (*Besessenheit*) – the former suggesting individual agency while the later complicating the notion (Kramer 1987: 240). That term is mimesis, which since Plato has been associated negatively with the ›irrational‹. Plato dismissed mimesis as means for the attainment of truth, exemplified by the inspired poet, actor and orator, who may speak as someone whom they are not. His was the context of the onset of writing and thus he preferred diegesis, narrative and plot. Aristoteles, in turn, defined mimesis as an anthropological constant: human beings imitate in order to represent nature. In African ecstatic mimesis, by contrast, states of possession force upon the subject the compulsion to imitate and resemble an other, someone that is different and not equal to the subject. What enters the body of the medium, however, is not simply what was seen, but the invisible dimension of it, like *muuya* among the Tonga, characterizing an entire class of phenomena (Kramer 2005: 131). As ›spirit‹ this other is part of reality and while it must be held at a distance, it nonetheless strives to become expressed (Kramer 1987: 241). It belongs to the domain of the wilderness conceptualized as the inverse to rational order and represents a form of power. Aristotle did not specify if imitation in art entailed the enactment of resemblances or differences. Yet this is a key question for modern anthropology. For Aristotle, mimesis was the very cause for poetic creativity. And who could deny that in poetry one is possessed by the word?

## References

- AUERBACH, Erich (2001 [1946]): *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Tübingen, Basel: A. Francke Verlag.
- BENZ, Ernst (1972): »Ergriffenheit und Besessenheit als Grundformen religiöser Erfahrung«. In: *Ergriffenheit und Besessenheit. Ein interdisziplinäres Gespräch über transkulturell-anthropologische und -psychiatrische Fragen*, hg. v. Jürgen Zutt, Bern, München: Francke, 125-148.
- COLSON, Elizabeth (1969): »Spirit Possession among the Tonga of Zambia«. In: *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*, hg. v. John Beattie/John Middleton, London: Routledge, 69-103.
- JOUSSE, Marcel (1974): *L'Anthropologie du Geste*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- KLEIN, Melanie (1975 [1937]): »Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945«. In: *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, Volume I, New York: The Free Press, 306-343.
- KÖNIG, René (1984): »Einführung: Ethnologie als Sozialwissenschaft. Soziologie und Ethnologie«. In: *Ethnologie als Sozialwissenschaft*, hg. v. Ernst Wilhelm Müller et al., Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 17-35.
- KRAMER, Fritz W. (1983): »Afrikanische ›Fremdgeister‹ in ihren Verkörperungen«. In: *Spiegel und Gleichnis, Festschrift für Jacob Taubes*, hg. v. Norbert W. Bolz/Wolfgang Hübner. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 377-384.

- KRAMER, Fritz W. (1987): *Der rote Fes: Über Besessenheit und Kunst in Afrika*. Frankfurt/Main: Athenäum.
- KRAMER, Fritz W. (2005): »Über afrikanische Darstellungen des Fremden«. In: *Fritz Kramer. Schriften zur Ethnologie*, hg. v. Tobias Rees. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 122-144.
- LACAN, Jacques (2002 [1966]): »The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience«. In: *Écrits. A Selection*, übers. v. Bruce Fink, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 3-9.
- LIENHARDT, Godfrey (1961): *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- MÜHLMANN, W.E. (1972): Ergriffenheit und Besessenheit als kulturanthropologisches Problem. In: *Ergriffenheit und Besessenheit. Ein interdisziplinäres Gespräch über transkulturell-anthropologische und -psychiatrische Fragen*, hg. v. Jürgen Zutt, Bern, München: Francke, 69-79.
- ZUTT, Jürgen (1972): Ergriffenheit, Erfülltheit und Besessenheit im psychiatrischen Erfahrungsbereich. In: *Ergriffenheit und Besessenheit. Ein interdisziplinäres Gespräch über transkulturell-anthropologische und -psychiatrische Fragen*, hg. v. Jürgen Zutt, Bern, München: Francke, 11-24.