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MODERNITY'S REGIMES OF WONDERMENT

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*Curious Visions of Modernity:
Enchantment, Magic, and the
Sacred* by David L. Martin.
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2011. xviii + 255 pages. \$32.95
cloth.

When Walter Benjamin writes in Convolute N of the *Arcades Project* that he has “nothing to say, only to show,” does anyone really believe him?¹ David L. Martin cites this well-known statement in the first pages of his excellent study *Curious Visions of Modernity*. He does so less to explain his own methods, however, than to invoke something of a modernist incantation. Indeed, Benjamin’s dictum echoes a line by Pablo Picasso borrowed by Jacques Lacan in Seminar 11: “I do not seek, I find.”² Where we might expect to find a statement of method, Lacan instead presents us with findings. As Sigmund Freud said, “Wo es war, soll ich werden.” (Where it [the id] was, I [the ego] shall be.) What is curious, though, is that the claim itself—“I don’t seek, I find”—discloses the very methodological reflection it professes to withhold, albeit in the form of a borrowed line, a resonant fragment of historical discourse.

By the time Lacan gets to Seminar 24, moreover, even *finding* is off the table: “Long ago, I happened to say, imitating a famous painter, ‘I don’t seek, I find.’ At the point I’m at now, I don’t find as long as I don’t seek.”³ Of course, there’s more to such statements than merely the showy disavowal of method—how could there not be? Still, there’s something of the conjuring trick in these inscrutable mottos. Don’t find, don’t seek, don’t even tell: our eyes are directed

elsewhere, thereby sustaining the master's sleight of hand. Such claims thus amount to something other than a hermeneutic (or an object-oriented ontology). Rather than inducing us to heed the call of things from within the tangle of discourse that enshrouds them, these utterances instead comprise the magic words of philosophical stagecraft, a theoretical version of *welcome to the show, presto, hocus pocus, abracadabra*. Reason supplies its own magic words: the terms *saying, showing, seeking, finding, and telling* all have ordinary meanings, yet they are no less caught up in the irrational constellation of terms in Martin's subtitle—*enchantment, magic, and the sacred*. Insofar as these common participles also underwrite the formation of modern rationality of the scientific sort, they also have complex critical genealogies, which Martin's book aims to trace.

In his three-part study of early modern cabinets of curiosity, anatomical specimens, and pictorial technologies, Martin examines the "stagecraft" that underpins the way modern science—not to mention philosophy—has been able to make inert matter speak (60). Michel Foucault, whose work underpins Martin's study in profound ways, named his version of this stagecraft "archaeology." Benjamin likens his own approach to montage. Martin's is more akin to *Industrial Light and Magic*, full of stunning archival

pyrotechnics, and appropriate to the "regime of wonderment" he wants to rescue. As Martin writes,

When the task of the scholar was to get objects to speak of the truth that was hidden within them, a truth that only the object itself fully "knew," illumination came through an act of unpacking the microcosmic collection, of arranging the words of the text of creation so that one might interpret the signatures inscribed within all things. In this setting, the fake often pointed to higher truths. (45)

Like Benjamin, Martin is interested in exhibiting telling fragments; he indicates by pointing out, illustrating, and illuminating. On this front, he offers a telling confession: "For many years," he writes, "I have been something of an academic collector, watching out for fragments and broken pieces of early modern visual culture discarded and scattered by the vagaries of historical discourse" (xi). What he exhibits in *Curious Visions* are holdovers of early modern curiosity—"the fragment, the narrative, the excursion, the fleeting glance, the sympathy, and the resonance" (ix)—that animate the scientific practices he features in his book: the assembly of collections, the examination of human anatomy, and the making of maps.

Martin shows how these things disclose their theatrical and talismanic powers in curiosity cabinets, operation theaters, and map rooms, and then how they harden into the disciplinary apparatus of scientific rationality in museology, anatomy, and cartography. The book's second section on the twinned discovery of the corpse and the corpus of knowledge is especially striking, laying out how the handling of the dead invigorates and haunts the structures of knowledge that inform medical science, through the work of the anatomist Andreas Vesalius, as well as Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). Here, as throughout his study, Martin's project of scholarship-as-collecting bears a double imperative: On the one hand, it documents how the curious, wondrous, and even magical qualities of such heterogeneous corpuses become the very means through which early modern scientific practices establish norms. The "fabulous exemplar" becomes, in other words, a technology for disciplinary regulation. On the other hand, Martin's work strives to restore to such exemplars the heterogeneity and strangeness against which they have been instrumentalized; for Martin, modern rationality is always shot through with the fragmentary curiosities from which it emerged.

As its archaeological project suggests, Martin's book owes as much to Foucault as to Benjamin; its three

principal sites of attention—collections, bodies, and spaces—stand in for Foucault's favorite genealogical haunts: mental asylums, prisons, and natural histories. The theoretical pairing of Benjamin and Foucault effects a productive synthesis for Martin in his "archaeology" of the visual," which, as he writes, is "aimed precisely at redressing the modern proclivity toward the production of monuments" (xv). *Curious Visions* is very much a book about method, but a book that refuses to reify its methodology as anything other than a set of performances and magical tricks. The project is well suited to the capacious multidisciplinary zone of visual studies, engaging and implicating the fields of museology, art history, anthropology, science, and postcolonial studies. His approach is suspicious of textuality and the linguistic turn: "Modernity's binary relationship between signs and their signifiers has tended to conflate the act of writing with the logic of the catalog: tying down ideas and meaning in definitive forms. In this regard, the modern commentary errs towards assessment and opposition, not the invitation to recollection" (42). Martin's suspicion toward *telling*—and toward discursivity more broadly—nevertheless yields a substantive proposition for contemporary scholarship—namely, that we heed the magic words of propositional discourse as part of the show.

In his conclusion, Martin recounts an anecdote that reflects on the book's overall argument about the oddly irrational and heterogeneous practices of curiosity that undergird the development of scientific rationality. Explaining to a car full of acquaintances his thesis, for instance, that the epistemology of modern medical science was predicated on dead bodies rather than on living ones, Martin tells his audience that "when we walk into a doctor's surgery it is a *dead* body that is presented before them, not our vital and living body" (178). Not only has the anatomical gaze of medical science long been founded on the study of cadavers, but, as Martin contends, the "normative body" of the medical discipline derives from the profession's recourse to "inert, dissected, criminal bodies" (71) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In his concluding anecdote, Martin reports that one of his interlocutors, an incredulous marine scientist, retorted, "I'm sorry, David. I don't think any doctor would agree with you. I know, for one, that when a specimen is in front of me, I imagine it as alive, it is a living body that I see and to which my observations are directed" (178). The point of Martin's anecdote is less to bolster the immediate historicist claim that the cadaver figures strongly in the genealogy of the medical discipline than to register a blind spot in *scientific* resistance to his *archaeological* scholarship.

What makes the anecdote *telling* is that this response mirrors his point but does not refute it. The discussant sees the dead specimen as alive but doesn't notice how this sleight of hand depends on an operation of "revelation and concealment" (188).

Martin's argument here bears a latent, yet insistent, political charge. His anecdote is reminiscent of an old joke about a car mechanic and a surgeon, in which their difference in professional status comes down to the same distinction between living and dead bodies. Having repaired the surgeon's car—meticulously stripping its engine, cleaning each part, and reassembling the vehicle—the mechanic returns the keys to his wealthy customer and says, "You know, you and I are really quite the same. We both open up the bodies of the patients we work on, expose the guts, and fix all the right parts in order to keep the machine up and running. Yet it's you who gets paid the big bucks. Why is this?" The surgeon impatiently takes the keys, waits a beat, and then replies, "Yes, well, try repairing it while the engine is running." The joke, as Martin demonstrates throughout his book, is tied to the epistemological double vision of modern reason: it privileges both the implicit humanism of the living, the organic engine over the inorganic mechanism of the car, and the procedural distinction between working on a running

motor and working on an arrested one. Yet, to the extent that the joke works, its proposition directs us to the mechanic's insight: the surgeon's condescending distinction exhausts the show in the tell by reinforcing the ideologically commonplace hierarchy—reminiscent of the surgeon's superiority to the barber—which the mechanic's remark breaks with a fascinating, if disarmingly literal, spell of epistemological continuity.

Martin's own meditations on the role of curiosity and magical thinking in the function of discourse come to light in his conclusion to the anecdote. As Martin reflects, the notion that the surgeon would see "only a living body" is, he writes, "precisely the point of the matter: that modern science is possessed of a gaze that allows its practitioners to envisage (or, should I say, have visions of) the dead-as-living" (178). The contemporary practice of medicine may be removed from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practice of illustrating flayed and dissected cadavers as animated, classically posed bodies, yet the rhetorical strategy of bringing such corpses to life, of subsuming the dead bodies and specimen part-objects of medical experimentation and training within an disciplinary framework of "life science," persists with "the very discursive structures of scientific practice itself, as an innate,

prescient scientific 'vision'" (179). "Viewing, tracing and exploring the ambivalent 'desire' as a function of discourse" means to tell without telling all, so as not to exhaust the show in the process. Martin's *Curious Visions* thus strives to restore some of the vital glamour to knowledge, and some of the magic to erudition.

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NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 460.
2. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book 11, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 216.
3. Jacques Lacan, quoted in Roberto Harari, *How James Joyce Made His Name: A Reading of the Final Lacan*, Contemporary Theory (New York: Other, 2002), 172–73.