Visual Esperanto and Digital Beasts,

Or *Getty Images* and the Colonization of Sight[1]

I. Sight Test

What do we have here: a stuffed iguana hat? An attention-seeking punk? Our attention is drawn into the image in search of an answer. The eye travels up the profile, around the reptilian tail, along the arched back, past limpid feet, to the scaly head, and down the neck. Each element contributes a fragment of information from which meaning can be configured.

The photographer contends that we are to read this pose as, "a statement of arch-individuality." The message, at a level of affirmative identification, is roughly: I'm a non-conformist free spirit, I wear whatever I like and I pull it off with pizzazz!

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[1] The author would like to thank Tim Flach and Getty Images for permission to reproduce the photographs used in this article. It has not been possible to print the photographs in their original color version. But for anyone interested in seeing the original images, please visit: www.studio58.co.uk. The author would also like to thank the following people for their invaluable help and feed-back on early drafts of this paper: Matthias Bruhn, Lorraine Daston, Roberto Farneti, Karen Kramer, Gregg Mitman, Tania Munz, Michele Vitucci and Heike Weber.

At another level, however, a meta-level that situates the image within the language game of its creation and exposure, it might equally be interpreted as an oblique commentary on the punk movement – political dissent dead-ended in fetishistic consumption. Walter Benjamin's condemnation of photography as the cardinal fashion victim comes to mind:

> The creative source of photography is its pre-emptory dependence on fashion. 'The world is beautiful' – that is its slogan…even in its most dreambound subject matter anticipating re-sale value rather than insight.[2]

The iguana-woman image cast almost entirely in shades of bright and pastel green is a prime example of photography's "pre-emptory dependence" on the postures and attitudes of high fashion. Yet the image also seems strangely unmotivated in that there is no discernable profit-drive. What are we being sold? Nothing, it would appear. No brand, no product, not even a lifestyle – just punk and beast fused in the formal dynamics of composition, an aesthetic apotheosis arguably achieving what Kant might have termed, "purposiveness without purpose." This ostensible indifference is, however, misleading. To take in this image is to engage, as the following elaborations will show, in a commercial transaction of sorts; public demand triggers its supply and supply reinforces demand. Incrementally, image-by-image, visual expectations shift, as does the nexus of unspoken shared assumptions within which visually mediated symbolic relations operate.

The above photograph arguably furthers a creeping process of enculturation within a milieu of systemically aligned commercial interests. Although this image is off the charts for most applied advertising contexts – "nice eye-candy", as they like to

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[2] Walter Benjamin, *Medienästhetische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002), 314. In this paper all translations from German texts have been made by the author.

say in the visual content industry, but "useless in a business sense," as one picture editor opined – it stands a good chance of being featured in a glossy magazine as a stand-alone, no caption or marketing angle needed. The purpose of circulating such an image is not to move specific products, but rather to commodify a frame of mind, to sell a way of seeing the world, to forge an aesthetic consensus in the target audience. In the above quoted "Short History of Photography", Benjamin proposes a mode of resisting the rampant commercialism of the medium of photography: because "the true face of this photographic creativity is the advertising or the association," he says, "the appropriate reaction to it is its unmasking or fabrication."[3] A rigorous methodological principle every bit as pertinent today as when he was writing in 1931. But how to achieve this mandatory "unmasking" or "fabrication"?

Béla Balázs, writing in 1920s, advocates a counter-intuitive form of resistance by urging unconditional surrender to the seduction of images as a precondition for breaking their spell: "Spectators who have never felt their living reality freeze in a moment of eternity and crystallize around an image have never really experienced an image." [4] So let us surrender. Connecting the spaces between the lines, new shapes emerge and cycle through countless permutations, a kaleidoscopic gaze. Eventually, a static mental picture takes hold and superimposes itself on the scene: a composite eye has emerged from the mesh of color and form – the lizard forms its eyelid, the spikes its eyelashes, and the woman's head the iris of this strange eye-in-the-sky of interpretive possibilities. Once witnessed, the new image becomes ineradicable. It cannot be un-seen. Though auto-generated, it can recalibrate the spectator's sensory

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[3] "Fabrication" is a translation of Benjamin's term "Konstruktion."

[4] Béla Balázs, *Ein Baedeker Der Seele. Und Andere Feuilletons Aus Den Jahren 1920 - 1926*, ed. Hanno Loewy (Berlin: Das Arsenal, 2002), 28.

purchase of the photograph: this elusive new eye is as imponderable and pervasive as the politics of sight in the age of the digital distribution of images.

This essay pertains to recent developments in the global trade of commercial images and related changes in the emotional configuration of contemporary subjectivity. In particular, it focuses on the commercial image purveyor, *Getty Images,* and a new visual brand the company is disseminating. The animal photography of Tim Flach serves as a case study for exemplifying this brand's aesthetic character and exploring its subliminal suggestiveness[5]. The paper argues that when we "think" with Flach's animals, we are rehearsing a decidedly post-regional gaze. Methodologically, the paper relates current trends in the regime of sight to predictions made in the last century by early media theorists, especially Adorno, Benjamin, Balázs and Kracauer. Given the nascent media with which these thinkers were concerned – photography and film – their *visionary observations* were often enough also *observations on vision*.

II. The Centralized Digital Image Bank

Tim Flach is not a household name. But his photography circulates through the average household as if he were. His images have global exposure reaching picture

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[5] Much of this paper is drawn from personal observations the author made over a one-year period (2001 - 2002) while collaborating with Tim Flach on an exhibition project entitled *AcroBats*. The author is indebted to Flach for the numerous insights he shared about his work and the stock industry. In the course of this collaboration, the author also had occasion to observe and interact with other *Getty* photographers and employees at the *Getty* headquarters in London. Most recently, the author has benefited from interviews with influential figures in the field of visual content delivery, especially Louis Blackwell, Stephen Mayes and Michele Vitucci.

editors, creative directors and design groups in all countries through the distributive rationale of a photographic agency. Currently, one of his images is sold somewhere in the world approximately every thirty minutes, a frequency that is steadily increasing. His photography appears on billboards and food packages, in magazines and newspapers, as calendars, postcards or stamps. When he travels, he invariably sees tokens of his work integrated in local advertising campaigns and associated with a vast range of product lines. Yet the prominence of his work goes mostly unnoticed because he is not credited by name. Even the name of his main distributor, *Getty Images*, is listed in such small print as to be easily overlooked.

Flach is one of the most highly valued photographers under license with the commercial image-giant *Getty Images* – a centralized distribution agency supplying visual content for every kind of illustrated surface. His animal images are part of a media revolution that is currently transforming the licensing and distribution of visual material. This revolution has received little scholarly attention thus far, but its effects are palpable on all sides. A new mechanism of visual content delivery is re-decorating the public arenas. To understand this mechanism, and its ramifications for the image habitat of the consuming public, it is important to understand the nature of stock images. In contrast to commissioned commercial images that are ordered by a customer for a specific purpose, stock consists of a pre-existing collection of photographs from which a suitable image is first chosen, and then adapted to its print milieu. The difference between them is like the difference between tailor-made clothes and *prêt-a-porter*. Magazine articles rely primarily on stock imagery to brighten up their copy; big name companies will commission bespoke visuals for major advertising campaigns but often resort to stock photographs for convenience and economy.

Historically, stock libraries were small businesses holding limited collections of photographs, often on a restricted range of subjects. Originally these collections were rights-managed, which meant every image was leased with exclusionary clauses restricting access to competitors. Most of the agencies were founded after World War II. But in the early 1990s a royalty-free system emerged based on selling images in bulk with unlimited and unrestricted rights of usage. The divide between rights-managed and royalty-free agencies split the industry into two camps. Over the last decade, however, these two models have been consolidated to form a cohesive new system of distribution. Globalization of the world market and the advent of internet commerce have enabled the rise of a new kind of photo agency: the centralized, digital image data bank. These are large conglomerates of former stock libraries which license and distribute the images in their collection for worldwide usage. *Getty Images* (founded in 1995) and *Corbis* (founded in 1989) are the leading behemoths peddling everything from historical photographs to contemporary fashion, from life-style to wild-life, from politics to sports. Between them they are said to supply 70% of the images we see, and this figure is set to increase.[6] Their collections not only comprise both rights-managed and royalty-free collections, they have also started to develop a line in commissioned photography.

Although *Getty Images* initially saw itself as an aesthetic innovator in the sphere of stock photography, and *Corbis* strove to position itself as the world's premier virtual museum by acquiring digital rights to grandmasters of every ilk and distinction, the companies have grown to resemble each other in the heat of contest. Their editorial policies are said to be, as the recipes of *Cola* and *Pepsi*, closely

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[6] Paul Frosch, "Rhetorics of the Overlooked: On the Communicative Modes of Stock Advertising Images," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2, no. 2 (July 2002): 174.

guarded trade secrets.[7] Employees are instructed not to comment on the respective house-styles being formulated. Whereas commercial image distributors used to be known as "photo libraries" or "photo archives", *Getty Images* and *Corbis* are often called "image banks." Image Bank, originally the name of a specific agency founded in1974, has since come to designate a distinctive new phenomenon in the provision of visual content. The linguistic shift from "photo library" or "picture archive" to "image bank" is apt given the cultural authority of financial institutions today as compared with that of archives and libraries.[8]

Mark Getty, the founder of *Getty Images*, was a banker before entering the image business and appears to have imported into the picture licensing trade many of the models and techniques employed in the financial sector. Just as banks make their profits from interest earned on money in the accounts of clients, so too many of the photographs in the *Getty* collection are produced by photographers at their own cost, the picture budget is financed from outside the company coffers. The higher risk to the photographers working on a free-lance basis is outweighed by the provision of higher royalty fees. By contrast, images specifically and uniquely commissioned by *Getty Images* carry smaller royalties (note: stock commissioning should not be

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[7] Opinions differ amongst those working in the industry; while some would argue that the editorial policies are still carefully guarded secrets and claim to know a *Getty* or a *Corbis* picture on sight, others maintain that the secret is long out and, indeed, that the visual output of the two companies is indistinguishable.

[8] Banks are responsible for managing our most precious assets, not only money, data and images, but also vital organic substances as evidenced by the notions of gene bank, sperm bank and blood bank. The invocation of a "bank," at least in the western world, implies the existence of a vast system of controls and accountability structures combined with a service model providing ready access to a given commodity or resource.

confused with commissioning at the top end of the advertising market). The tiered and complicated royalty arrangements in the company are carefully calculated instruments of risk management in an arena of financial investment.

A recent book with the telling title, *Bildwirtschaft*, literally *Picture Economy*, likens the circulation of stock images in society to currency flows in the global economy.

> In being a finite, consumable entity, images are also a kind of currency. They reduce singular events to commensurable dimensions, that is to say they turn the photo of a person, place or event into a norm that calls forth its own reactions and fashions and this, in turn, has a reciprocal influence on the production of images.[9]

If pictures are currencies, their circulation must be governed by institutions akin to banks. Indeed, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard argues that the fine art museum serves as the gold standard of the fine art market.[10] But the gold standard is no longer a regulatory factor in world markets either for banking or in the currency of images. High finance is governed by floating exchange rates and images are valued according to expected visibility: the value of an image today is a function of its "eye ball count," a term used in internet commerce to describe the number of hits to a website.

Commonly likened to "wall-paper" or "canned food," stock was regarded as a trade in stereotypes where the *standard deviation* carried a premium and the unremarkable outperformed the iconic. Paul Frosch, a media theorist specializing in image banks, has pointed out that forgettable images hold a clear business advantage

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[9] Matthias Bruhn, *Bildwirtschaft. Verwaltung Und Verwertung Der Sichtbarkeit* (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2003), 18.

[10] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 203.

in that they can be recycled resulting in higher licensing fees for the agency.[11] A stock photograph's "planned obsolescence", to speak with Vance Packard, is its capacity to self-eradicate – spectators must forget or, better yet, never even register the presence of an image on their mental radar screens. Marketing experts maintain that this very innocuousness gives stock its subliminal and directive force; its efficacy as an advertising instrument depends upon going unnoticed. Unconscious seeing, so the theory goes, renders spectators more susceptible to putative values, promises and insinuations, and bypasses the cognitive censorship that would accompany more attentive modes of visual comprehension.

Stock imagery has not traditionally been prized for its artistic merit. Connoting clichéd, unimaginative and relatively low-budget photography, stock libraries were deemed repositories of visual pap. For designers there were no kudos in choosing a prefab picture from an image menu – the glamorous end of the business lay with commissioning, that is where photography culminated in model castings, lavish lunches and adrenaline highs. A photographer seeking artistic recognition by his peers and colleagues would until recently underplay, and even hide, his involvement with the stock industry. It was déclassé to admit that one's income was a function of stock royalties. No self-respecting artist would so compromise his aesthetic standards; stock threatened the mystique of the creative persona.

But these assumptions are undergoing rapid revision. The near-monopoly hold which *Getty Images* and *Corbis* have been able to obtain over the image market is having a profound impact, both quantitative and qualitative, on visual landscapes in the information age. While the onus is still on the spectators *not seeing* and *not*

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[11] Frosch, "Rhetorics of the Overlooked: On the Communicative Modes of Stock Advertising Images," 175.

noticing certain aspects of their ambient imagery, the cultivation of public inattention is no longer being achieved by deploying innocuous graphic material, at least not exclusively. Rather, a complex and highly self-referential picture language is being developed that draws the spectator's attention to itself and, hence, away from any biases adhering to the image. This qualitative shift will be the focus of subsequent sections. First, however, it is important to establish the magnitude of quantitative changes under way.

The word in *Getty* circles is that image consumption has increased tenfold over the last ten years. Howsoever that figure may have been compiled and whatever it may mean, it confirms Benjamin's prediction that: "Reproducible artwork is, increasingly, the reproduction of works of art geared towards reproducibility."[12] Stock photography is the *reductio ad absurdum* of reproducing artistic commodities for the sake of reproduction. A further indication that image consumption has multiplied exponentially in recent years is the growing agitation, in the popular press and scholarly circles, regarding the so-called "Iconic Turn." Technically, this term describes the influence of visual forms of communication on consciousness. In its vernacular usage, however, it has come to describe the swamping of the market – and our minds – with unsolicited graphic material.

Given the proliferation of digital cameras and home imaging techniques, it would seem that the sheer diversity of image material would multiply alongside the increase in volume. Instead, variety appears to be dwindling.[13] This development is

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[12] Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk Im Zeitalter Seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," in *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften 1*, *Suhrkamp Taschenbuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977 (1955)), 144.

[13] Bruhn, *Bildwirtschaft. Verwaltung Und Verwertung Der Sichtbarkeit*, 67. (Bruhn 2003, 53, 67).

consistent with Adorno's critique of the ratings-driven culture industry whose narrowing influence he saw exemplified and prefigured in television programming.[14] A recent *Spiegel Magazine* article on image banks reports: "In the meantime even die-hard Getty supporters see that a piece of cultural heritage is in danger. After all, photos are more than archived pixels. 'Most young photo editors are only able to push an order button at the supermarket Getty and Corbis. They aren't aware of agencies like Magnum or Focus anymore', said Michele Vitucci, previous Managing Director Europe for *Getty*.' The language of images is becoming 'ever more uniform'."[15] It is worth noting that Vitucci has had a long-standing professional association with the *Tony Stone* collection, *Getty's* premier image brand – the brand that carries Flach's animals.

Visual content, previously supplied from myriad sources and expressing a multiplicity of perspectives, increasingly reflects the output of two large commercial institutions. Our ambient graphics have the aesthetic coherence of a film dispersed throughout our material environment and arrested in freeze-frame animation. These days, image material as varied as that to be found in newspapers, commercials and textbooks ultimately has a common source and progeny. Recycled images in multiple contexts produce patterns of repetition and passive recognition. Image retrieval depends on search engines that rely on keywords structuring the collection as whole; this is nothing new. But the market domination that centralized image banks have been able to obtain is a novel phenomenon; as images journey into the vast holdings of these companies and back into the public domain referential regularities arise that

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[14] Theodor W. Adorno, "Fernsehen Als Ideologie," in *Kulturkritik Und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 518-32.

[15] Nils Klawitter, "Bilder-Stürmer in Not," *Der Spiegel* 26, no. 23. June (2003): 142.

obey a fractal algebra of cultural production. These, in turn, establish correlations between images and concepts.[16] "The keywords used to retrieve images become part of the definition of the image and its meaning," says Stephen Mayes, former Group Creative Director at *Getty Images*.[17]

Even though *Getty Images* supports an in-house think tank whose members are engaged in trying to predict visual trends and open new image markets, the company can steer and intervene in the larger phenomenon it is servicing only to a limited degree. Using its own financial performance, sales ledgers and customer feedback as a barometer of the overall market situation, *Getty's* creative strategy rests on economic pragmatism. As Siegfried Kracauer points out with respect to the film industry, "manufacturers labor to expand their business. That they also produce values does not occur for the sake of the values."[18] His observation has direct application here in that the aesthetic and ideological coherence associated with today's visual content industry is comparable to a film. Yet this coherence is an epiphenomenon of the conditions of distribution – no central intelligence can mastermind the process of image alignment.

Coincident with the centralized digital image bank's coming to dominate global delivery of photographic services, is a thoroughgoing revision of the character of stock imagery. A few years ago *Getty Images* introduced a new editorial policy for selecting photographs for inclusion in its commercial archive. Approximately every three months Louis Blackwell, the creative director of *Getty Images*, issues a brief enjoining photographers to produce visuals that conjure up specified moods, feelings

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[16] Bruhn, *Bildwirtschaft. Verwaltung Und Verwertung Der Sichtbarkeit*, 43,48.

[17] Letter Mayes to Kramer, Sept. 21, 2003: attached text file entitled "World Press Masterclass."

[18] Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament Der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), 54.

and aspirations. These one- to two-page briefs are written in a curious, New Age-speak, i.e. feel the rain on your skin or the release that comes from shouting by a passing train; you have no fear of expressing yourself because you are in touch with an inexhaustible source of creative energy. Each brief is thematically unified around specific rubrics, such as “heroes,” “vegas,” “spirit,” or “meet me”; the corresponding text links these spheres of affective resonance with current buzzwords of social and political import.

For three months *Getty* photographers devote themselves, and their resources, to rendering these briefs in visual form. Investment dollars soar in preparation of sets, model hires and shoot schedules lasting up to several days. At the end of the quarter, submissions are made and a selection committee chooses entries for inclusion in the online collection, each brief having given rise to thousands of graphic submissions. The proverbial picture worth a thousand words is inverted by a few words spawning thousands of pictures.

The corporate strategy resting upon Blackwell’s spiritual meditations is to increase sales by building a new brand of images whose key characteristic is photography that “moves,” “touches” or “reaches” the consumer. Old stock is being phased out and replaced by new conceptually enhanced stock. *Getty* management considers Flach’s animal images to be directly “on-brand.” Thus, a closer look at his work will give definition to the aesthetic character of this brand.

III. Flach’s Emoticons

A Flach image is comparable to an *emoticon* – a cryptogram of keyboard characters used to embellish an email message with the emotional grammar of the author’s

intended tone.[19] Flach utilizes a sophisticated array of techniques both to produce and enhance his images and to signal that a given image has a specific emotional charge. It is possible to detect three main classes of visual cues in his work: *sensory* cues, *gestural* cues and *treatment* cues, whereby often several are in play at once.

The most striking and obvious way in which Flach achieves *sensory* identification is by highlighting the eyes. A flash of light invariably accentuates the eye of his animal model, a hint of consciousness, a dart of brightness that he likes to refer to as a "ping." Its prominence in his photographs should not be misconstrued as an "authentic" expression of the animal's untamed spirit. The *ping* is a detail exceedingly difficult to orchestrate and produce; consequently, the eyes of most animals in wildlife photography look flat, dumb or muted. Flach applies meticulous care to the problem of illuminating the eyes. The procedure involves an intricate light installation uniquely assembled and consisting of honeycombs, ring flashes, screens and flags. Before shooting can commence, Flach spends hours "bending the light" so that the eyes of the animal model are illuminated with requisite precision (a procedure which usually tires the subject long before shooting has even begun).

19 For a listing of recognized emoticons, see: http://www.windweaver.com/emoticon.htm

Seeing is not the only sensory reality to be visually captioned, however. *Touch* finds suggestive notation too. Take, for example, Flach's photograph of a Lurcher shot from below through a glass floor.

The dog's body is suspended in space like an abstracted piece of calligraphy, species attributes attenuated in the neutered creature. Although appearing to be suspended in air, the animal is standing on a transparent surface. Shot from below, its paws are exaggerated in size and darkened in their immediate contact with the glass. This angle places pictorial emphasis on the sense of touch and, hence, on a point of affinity between the dog and the spectators – tactile sensibility.

Flach's photographs also engage sound and hearing. Peering out from its leaf, the Red-eyed Tree Frog looks set to emit a croak. Not a frog-like croak, mind you, but a one-liner croak, the opening gambit of a conversation, something to the effect of: "Hey, babe!" The composition of the photograph revolves around the animal's mouth placed front and center. The framing leaf amplifies its mouth -- and the implied croak -- through color shape and composition.

At the same time the Tree-frog's flirtatious alertness engages the spectator in reciprocity. The image communicates by means of a second class of visual references, namely *gestural* cues, a code of communication conveyed through posture, body language and implied movement. One of the most striking uses of gestural cues in Flach's work is his series on the Australian fruit-bat. At the awards ceremony 2001 of London's Association of Photography, the creative press described these bat portraits as the most 'human' photographs of the year. Ironically, most of the competing entries showed human beings, Flach's did not.

The human resemblance of these bats is elusive. It does not attach to any particular features – not the hairy faces, wizened bodies or skinny legs. Rather, their putative humanity is ubiquitous, a function of the distribution of the animal's parts in forming a recognizable whole. These bat poses are organized around a clear center of gravity; like us, they have a vertical stance. Moreover, the photographs have been turned upside down. This inversion of perspective enables the spectator to identify with the animal's comportment in terms of human poses. Every contour is suggestive of the human frame, the innumerable postures it adopts and the infinity of emotional states spectators see coded in those postures.

The bats are more striking than human models would be in the same poses. Imagine a man and woman emulating these animals; they would not move the viewer in the same way. Abstracting human forms into bat poses concentrates the mind on

the essence of gesture. What remains is the choreography of social relations, a general body language dissociated from the physical vocabulary of a given individual. Whether or not the viewer is drawn to or repelled by the bats, or both; the animals are neither good looking nor bad looking – just bat looking in a human way.

As Balázs points out, the same holds for all animals on film:

> How interesting the physiognomies and facial gestures of animals! And how mysterious that we should be able to understand them! Needless to say, this is based on an analogy. But perhaps this is justified…All animals are actually caricatures of certain human types…(they) carry the physiognomies of humans and, at the same time, keep their own lovable and honest animal faces.[20]

Here Balázs appears to have fallen prey to the anthropomorphism he is at pains to identify. As Flach's bats reveal, both parts of Balázs's so-called "analogy," are in fact human constructs; we never "understand" the animals. Turn the photographs around and the eloquent bearing of these bats becomes a submission to gravity unintelligible in human terms.

A third method by which Flach encodes his animal emoticons is *treatment*. Rather than relying on the heavy-handed symbolism of props – such as chimpanzees wearing a suit and tie – Flach transposes a visual system of references from the treatment of human subjects to the treatment of animal subjects. The animals function as symbolic placeholders; viewers identify not with the animals themselves but with their placement in a familiar symbolic context.

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[20] Béla Balázs, *Der Geist Des Films* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001 (1930)), 77.

The pictorial language of fashion is thematized in the contrasting blue, red and yellow coloring of the mandrill against an orange background. In the original color photograph, the animal's natural pigmentation is shown off as an elaborate cosmetic statement; eye shadow, lipstick and platinum-blond hair are alluded to in the garish colors of its nose and beard; its coiffure styled to meet the exacting standards of a top-end beauty parlor. Other examples of treatment cues include the beguiling finery of a Parrot arrested in deep blue and the abstracted geometry of a Pigeon in black and white. Here colors, shapes and patterns turn animal forms into emblems of beauty and glamour.

The parrot triptych alludes to the sweeping swirling shapes of the catwalk, the bird's feathers form a lavish cloak elegantly draped around its frame.

Another *treatment* cue employed by Flach is the family album with its characteristic snap-shots rendering of awkward and goofy moments often set in the home or a place of leisure. Flach employs his arsenal of sophisticated, photographic techniques to re-create this semblance of spontaneity. The photograph of a dog and man kissing resemble a settled, middle-aged couple.

The couple radiates earthy affection, a relationship based on physical immediacy where emotional bonds are upheld by touching, sniffing and licking. The dog seems human and the human dog-like. Treatment cues simultaneously de-familiarize our readings of the *animals* as well as the *human* frames of reference: make-up and fashion come to resemble animal plumage, the kiss an animal's kinship ritual.

IV. Fabricating Sentiment

Flach's work is the product of an image-making collective. From the quarterly call for photographs, to the debriefings with art editors at *Getty*, to consultations with animal handlers, fellow photographers and assistants, to his high-end commissions in the advertising world, Flach is immersed in an industry of professionals specialized in tracking, anticipating and delivering visual content for a consuming public.

His images are not the result of a lucky shot, jungle paparazzi style.[21] Nor does he simply bring a good eye to wildlife situations documenting with conscientious care the animal's behavior in its natural habitat.[22] He resists the conceit of photography as a neutral, objective recording of observable facts. Constructing the situation, manipulating the image, composing the visual trigger mechanism for producing a predictable emotional response – in short, crafting marketable *emoticons* – these are the qualities for which he prizes the medium of photography.

Flach's images are produced under conditions of tight quality control. His streamlining of the process is evidenced in his approach to the frame that surrounds the image. Whereas many photographers choose the frames after they have finished shooting their film by cropping the negative, Flach only rarely resorts to later adjustments. He disapproves of separating the shooting from the framing of an image because the frame is integral to the subject matter and determines the distribution of light. In order to accentuate recognition cues by means of highlights, Flach must know exactly how the image is going to be placed on the negative. Ideally, there is no

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[21] Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 64.

[22] Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature. America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

wasted space or rendering of useless information. He focuses the camera on the visual dynamics of the scene on set, especially any anthropomorphic opportunities it may afford.

Over the years, Flach has generated an environment conducive to his peculiar methodology. His studio is a cross between a surgical ward, a Buddhist temple and a circus tent. Evident in every corner are years of experience with animals on set. Having obtained possession of an empty warehouse in Shoreditch, London, 200 m^2 of open-plan space divided over two floors with 4 m ceilings, he supervised the renovation of the space. Besides accommodating animals of most any size, a glass floor allows pictures to be shot from underneath, enormous light fixtures can be cranked out of the ceiling and adjustable temperature gauges insure that room temperature is finely variable. Flach has found that temperature, more than any other single factor, allows him to influence the behavior of his animal models. In his studio animals are confined to a more predictable set of behavioral variables. This control allows him to zero-in on the anthropomorphic opportunities on set.

Although Flach has sole possession of the camera, his creative direction is strongly influenced by an image-making collective. For instance, preferences expressed by *Getty's* picture editors regarding the staging and production of a shoot will usually take precedence over Flach's own aesthetic judgment. Equally, the expertise possessed by animal handlers regarding the behavior and responses of their charges frequently serves as the stimulus for a shoot to follow one path rather than another. In addition there are make-up artists, stage designers, costume makers, set builders and their various assistants to take into account. The team assembled on the day of the shoot prefigures, in miniature, the market place; like a group dynamic

medium (or focus group), its responses help to funnel operative symbols from consumer culture into the image under construction.

The studio itself is also a key player in Flach's image-making collective. It establishes a creative margin of opportunity and puts technology in the service of chance. The camera and the eye see essentially different events, as Benjamin observes:

> … it is a different nature speaking to the camera than the eye. The difference consists especially therein that a space permeated by consciousness is replaced by one unconsciously permeated.[23]

The studio space is "unconsciously permeated" in the sense that it conditions the photographic output generated on its premises and favors the particular version of nature speaking to Flach's camera. Temperature, lighting design and his highly routinized handling of the photographic equipment, turn the space into a *dompteur* of sorts manipulating the animal's behavior for the camera. At the same time, the notion of an "unconsciously permeated" space applies to the creative situation inside the studio where team dynamics unconsciously adjust the crafting of each image with respect to the public imaginary.

At every stage of the image-production process, the emotiveness of the photograph is incrementally enhanced. Although the adjustments made along the way are sometimes indistinguishable to the casual observer, spectators asked to choose will invariably prefer one image over another. The process is akin to tightening a screw; with every turn the emotional message is more solidly in place. At no stage in this process is Flach alone – he is continually guided, prodded and encouraged by a team of technical collaborators.

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[23] Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk Im Zeitalter Seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," 162.

V. Concept Maps

Getty photographers think of themselves as "image-makers," not photographers. Their creative energy goes into formulating graphics with multivalent commercial applications. Recently, *Getty* insiders have introduced the notion of a "concept map," or "thought map," to distinguish the new line in sentiment-enriched imagery from old-fashioned stock photography. *Getty* markets itself as a purveyor of "conceptual images," at the same time that it promotes itself as a supplier of photographs "with a clear emotional message."

This deliberate and systematic collapsing of "concept" and "emotion" throughout the *Getty* enterprise should give pause to readers and spectators alike. Kracauer identifies the conflating of "concept and emotion" as the hallmark of propaganda material. He also notes, however, that the conflation can only be effective if "true emphasis is on visual communication." The more elusive the message of a film, he says, the more directly it imprints itself on "the unconscious drives and bodily reactions" of spectators. By contrast, he argues, a message that appears merely to be illustrated will neither "confound the senses" nor "render the spectator receptive to the ideas being propagated."[24] Kracauer's observations about film apply equally to the global picture-scape of stock photography.

Creative director Louis Blackwell recently went on record proclaiming Flach's animals to be the sentimental culmination of an artistic journey begun by the French documentary photographer, Cartier-Bresson. Blackwell makes this connection despite Cartier-Bresson's vehement repudiation of sentiment in photography: "The only joy

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[24] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theorie Des Films. Die Errettung Der Äußeren Wirklichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), 219.

in photography is geometry. All the rest is sentiment." In response, *Getty's* spokesman mounts a spirited "defense of sentiment":

> What an outrageous remark! How can the 'only joy' be geometry, and that be somehow elevated to a plane that is so far superior to 'sentiment'? The fact is that it is sentiment that gives photography much of its power.[25]

The reasons Blackwell adduces in favor of sentiment are telling in that they equate the value of a photograph with the bottom-line of profit maximization:

> Sentiment is the reason that photography works so effectively in the commercial world—whether as a newspaper front or back page image, or as a fashion shoot, or as a billboard ad or as a feature portrait.[26]

Flach's photographs instantiate the *Stone Getty* project. The company regularly uses his images for purposes of self-promotion. His animal portraits promote a *Weltanschauung* (the literal translation being 'a way of looking at the world') that is conducive to *Getty's* corporate agenda. Not only do these satisfy the distributor's vested interest in promoting visuals that have a long shelf life, the impeccable execution of Flach's work conveys a professionalism, precision and deliverability consonant with the company's aims. Most importantly, these images reify the workings of power in that they depict unruly animals tamed by the disciplining routines of a photographic studio. Flach's aesthetics of power and control facilitate *Getty's* exercise thereof.

In *Die Fliegenpein*, Elias Canetti penned an aphorism that could easily be applied to Flach, a man who "thinks in animals as others think in concepts."[27] In Flach's own words: "I am formulating a visual language structure that has emotional

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[25] Louis Blackwell, "In Defence of Sentiment," *Pictured*, no. 1 (2003): 50.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Elias Canetti, *Über Tiere* (München Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2002).

resonance." What he means is that his photographs are not only emotive but also didactic; they "formulate a visual language structure" in that they both depict animal forms and express a theory of pictures. If it is true, as Mitchell contends, that every ideology is an iconology and vice-versa, then it is appropriate to ask what ideology is being promoted by the theory of pictures Flach's images self-consciously promote.[28]

Flach himself maintains that his animals are "a mirror of the human condition in its rawest form." He thinks of his work as a conduit to emotional truths because it taps into the core of his spectators' affective responses. Not striving to capture the animals in their own terms, however these might be defined, he is concerned with human nature. Looking at animals through Flach's eyes is similar to experiencing animals in a petting zoo in that spectators don't encounter a representation of the natural world, but the staging of an ideology.[29] Yet unlike the aesthetics of display practiced in contemporary zoos, where moated exhibits have replaced iron-bar cages, the stylization and distortion techniques utilized by Flach announce that he has no pretensions at traditional naturalism.

Nevertheless, Flach is advocating a naturalism of sorts, namely that of the *emotional connection*. The problem with his take on naturalism is that, like traditional naturalism, it posits as fixed and universal categories of understanding that are, in fact, culturally determined. An emotional response, according to Flach, is proof positive that a given image expresses eternal values, the strength of response being directly proportional to the truth-content of the image. Although the response no doubt reveals that a chord has been struck in a given spectator on a given occasion, there is nothing fixed or eternal about the conditions under which this affective event

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[28] Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, 164.

[29] John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 1980.

takes place. Human nature is highly variable and inconstant, individuals change over the course of their lifetimes and so do societies. The only thing constant about our emotional experience is our belief in its constancy. Emotional responses present themselves as so autonomous in experience, it is virtually impossible to grasp in palpable terms that they are highly mediated and conditioned by external factors. Yet, every day the orchestrated transience of attraction – ever-changing fashions in clothes, life styles and causes – belie the private character of this emotional experience.

The question of "what images are," Mitchell writes, must be considered in light of the question of "what human nature is or might become." The act of seeing an image, animal or not, is inseparable from the act of projecting meaning onto the same, and the configuration of that meaning is a function of the existing symbolic order at a given historical moment. "Images," according to Mitchell, "are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status."[30] We, as spectators, turn them into such: first, by endowing them with meaning based on our own conditioned responses; and then, by misreading these same meanings as eternal verities. In this regard, Mitchell concurs with Balázs who, writing seventy years earlier, likens our proclivity to invest images with personal significance to applied physiognomy, that is the art of deciphering a person's character from the lines in his or her face. Balázs, echoing Kant, insists that phenomenal reflexivity in the form of physiognomical perception animates each and every sensory event:

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[30] Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, 9.

> Just as time and space are fundamental categories of perception that cannot be eliminated from our world of experience, so the physiognomical attaches itself to every phenomenon. It is a necessary condition of our perception.[31]

Both Mitchell's "heroic images" and Balázs' "physiognomical sight" admonish spectators to bear in mind that all meaning is projected meaning, even if it seems *natural* to the spectator or an *instrinsic* feature of the image itself. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between two distinct modalities of physiognomical projection, the *topical* and the *medial*. Connecting with Flach's animal portraits in human terms, i.e. the anthropomorphism discussed earlier in this paper, involves *topical* projection in that it pertains to the subject matter depicted and concerns our relationship with other species; believing his photographs to mirror the human condition involves *medial* projection in that it pertains to our assessment of the medium itself and posits photography as a vehicle capable of storing such profound, almost religious, content. By focusing the spectator's attention so keenly on the process of anthropomorphic identification, Flach's animals end up blunting awareness of the leap of faith involved in experiencing the medium of photography as a conduit to the eternally human.

An alternative reading of the notion of a *concept map*, then, is that any given image can be understood as a map through a terrain of topical-medial meanings working in concert. Flach's elaboration of visual techniques for *thinking with animals* distracts the viewer from the fact that they are also inevitably *thinking with media*. Reflexive energy is channeled into the animal's uncanny humanity but not into the symbolic function of the picture. Like a red flag to a bull, these pictures are able to steer the spectator's attention away from any corollary suggestiveness adhering to the

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[31] Balázs, *Der Geist Des Films*, 70.

image. Employing Flach's animals literally as *concept maps*, i.e. maps through a terrain of implied concepts, it becomes possible to explore the constellation of symbolic meanings immanent in the medium he has developed. These meanings are a product of the manner in which his body of work circulates in a global system of image distribution.

VI. *What* Human Condition?

Flach's positioning as a creative professional defies traditional distinctions between high and low culture; anonymously associated with a vast range of products and services, at one end, he is featured in museums like the National Portrait Gallery in London, at the other. Some of the same images for hire from *Getty Images* sell on the fine art market in signed, limited editions. Adorno would abhor such two-timing as the triumph of "pseudo-culture."[32] Snobbery aside, this collapsing of cultural distinctions has far-reaching implications for the revelatory potential of Flach's animals and for why a close reading of them can enhance our understanding of current cultural developments. The anthropomorphic quality of his images suggests that their appeal trades on human self-understanding; the international scope of his popularity betokens a global phenomenon. The question remaining is: what specific *thinking with animals* is occasioned by his images? Or in other words, what concept of humanity is enshrined by his images?

Kangaroos, red-eyed tree frogs, ants and lizards all form part of Flach's bestiary corpus. The images he enters into the *Getty Images* collection generate a particularly high ratio of profits per image and maintain their popularity over

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[32] Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 30-31.

exceptionally long periods. Unlike photographs of human beings whose referential scope tends to be constrained by the markers of class, gender, race, age and nationality, photographs of animals rehearse a realm of interpretive conventions that can bypass human stereotypes.

Of course, animal imagery is laden with its own layers of cultural meaning rooted in religion, heritage and politics (the sinfulness of the snake and the eeriness of the bat in the western tradition; the coding of animals as “domestic”, “agricultural” or “wild”; the conservationist efforts to elevate certain species in the public imaginary, such as the “gentle” elephant’ and the “noble” primate). But Flach’s stylized portraits strive to extract the animals from their existing frames of reference, thereby divesting them of their conventional symbolism. Metamorphosed into surrogate humans, they express a state of putative emotional “innocence”: the wrinkled pig, an evocation of age without biography or history; the monkey licking its thumb (see below), a tribute to well-being without sacrifice or compromise; the screaming monkey (see below), a meditation on vulnerability without exposure or risk.

The images are compelling. And so is the implied possibility of a visual Esperanto in whose universalizable embrace all humans being can be accommodated.

At the same time, it is remarkable that this vision should so captivate the public imagination. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* Clifford Geertz argues that the notion of a human being without culture is a contradiction in terms. His developmental argument is that because the human brain and human culture were coeval evolutionary adaptations, a "cultureless human being would probably turn out to be not an intrinsically talented though unfulfilled ape, but a wholly mindless and consequently unworkable monstrosity."[33] Yet Flach, working in concert with *Getty Images,* seems to be promoting just that – a vision of experience sterilized of 'contaminating' cultural influences.

Needless to say, this supra-cultural stance is itself a cultural act. Culture is not restricted to specific rites or ways of doing things; rather, it encompasses the formative activities of humans, whatever these may be. If humans, or the institutions they develop, efface the specificities of local-historical customs, taste, etc., then the instruments and acts of erasure are themselves cultural products and acts. Which

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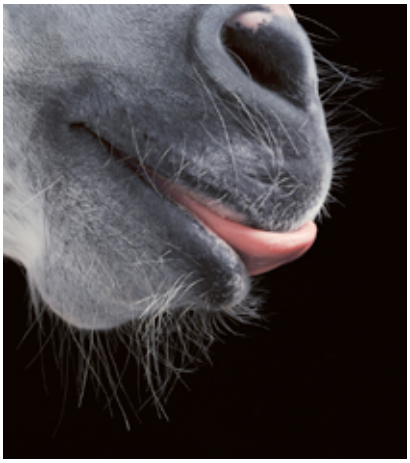
[33] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays.* (London: Fontana Press, 1993 (1973)), 68.

forms of cultural practice may be preferable, or more conducive to human happiness, is a question whose treatment exceeds the scope of this article. That the Fordist and Taylorist innovations in 20th century industrial production tapped human labor in ways that would agitate against personal and cultural individuation is widely acknowledged. That the media would be integral to upholding and furthering this trend by shaping public opinion has long been apparent to critically-minded media theorists.

The important point for the purposes of this paper is that the effectiveness and popularity of Flach's animal images across all sectors of society and in different national contexts, and their simultaneous foregrounding in the self-promotion of *Getty Images,* reveals a profound alignment between corporate interests and private values. As market analyses across all sectors of consumption show, Flach's animals do not reflect an extant social situation; cultural specificity is still a relevant factor in consumer behavior. Nonetheless, a growing body of literature and evidence attests that cultural variety and local traditions are being transmuted, and eroded, in the corporate race for global market share. Flach's animals are not only further evidence of this trend, they are an integral part of the mechanism propelling this alignment.

The global consumer culture Flach's animals embody and promote has its own characteristic values. These are particularly apparent with respect to sexual conduct and scientific developments. Two examples will suffice to illustrate how these values play out with respect to Flach's animals. Again, it is worth noting that deflective tactic of topical/medial ambiguity obtains. While spectators marvel at Flach's extraordinary imagery, the mediation of message can easily go unheeded. By flirting with the transgression of a taboo -- in the following case bestiality -- viewers are

caught off-guard, their senses confounded in the propagandistic manner described by Kracauer.



Flach's licking horse lips are a lusty and playful revisiting of the canonical licking lips imagery that has accompanied our advertising culture since the original Rolling Stones album to which it makes oblique reference. The image could figure in the promotion of a brand of gourmet ice creams or as an illustration for a magazine article on tongue piercing. Behind its multiple possible applications resonates a codified allusion to the human kiss as the foreplay to sexual intercourse, an activity ultimately ensuring the perpetuation of the species. But looking this gift horse in the mouth, the spectator finds a suggestion more indecent and transgressive than many a centerfold spread in the glossies. There is a chain of events hinted at here which, taken to its final conclusion, issues forth in a horse and human embrace reminiscent of Catherine the Great. Yet the picture's intrinsic humor blunts any edge of affront. The sexuality implicit in this scene is purely recreational; crossing a species boundary, it can serve no procreative ends. This image exists within, and itself perpetuates, a nexus of social arrangements, representational conventions and ideological constellations in which procreative sexuality has become an exceptional type of encounter, and scoring orgasms the pastime of choice.

The blurring of erotic boundaries performed in the next *concept map* goes so far as to warrant a designated term, *pornomorphism*. The same audience that pleasures in the picture of pork teats at an aesthetic level might well reject, or at least pause to consider in more critical terms, the picture's suggestive content.

The nipple looks startlingly similar to that of a human breast. The color tones, hairlessness and hygienic care evidenced in this scene place the spectator firmly in the arena of human hide rather than pigskin. Close examination of the mammary, itself involving sexually charged mental deliberations, reveals this teat to be attached to the utter of a pig, with a piglet in near proximity. Nevertheless the visual ambiguity remains. This is not an optical *illusion* in Gestalt psychological terms, where the teat is either rabbit or duck but can never be both at the same time. Rather, this is an optical *allusion* to a world in which species boundaries have been reduced to changes along a sequence of genetic code. The nipple is *both* that of a human and that of a pig, two species fused in a single breast. Skin grafts, often involving pig's skin, and organ transplants between animal species come to mind as well as genetic engineering with its myriad reproductive technologies. Innovations in the medical and biological technologies together with the vast social upheavals they entail are here cast in the naturalized visual vocabulary of a barnyard *Madonna con bambino*.

The point is not that this photograph, like a Trojan horse, slips the viewer a subversive political message behind an innocent scene of nursing. Flach's images do not contain messages in the transmission sense of sender/receiver. Rather, they are meaningful, and what is more, commercially successful, insofar as they reflect, and reinforce, an extant order of symbolic relations through which the viewers, the image brokers, the technical assistants on the day of the shoot and the photographer himself all make sense of the world. Flach's pig nipple compels attention because the jumbling of categories performed by this photograph is already well underway in the societies to be serviced by that image. The final line from George Orwell's 1946 novel, *Animal Farm,* is most apposite: **"**The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."

VII. "Taste is Ideology"

As pictures about pictures, Flach's animals convey a sentimental education, a schooling for the emotions. Unlike the fusion achieved in Orwell's vision, these photographs invite, and positively instruct, spectators to project levels of meaning presumably not shared by the animal models themselves. This discrepancy between the spectator and the animal model re-enshrines that long-established, and much defended, gulf separating the human animal from all other animals, at least as imagined by the former.[34] These human-like animals accentuate the uniqueness of being human. In so doing, they also further a mental isolationism that not only

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[34] Anna L. Peterson, *Being Human. Ethics, Environment, and Our Place in the World* (University of California Press, 2001). (Peterson 2001).

separates the human animal from all other animals, but also spectators from each other.

Flach's animals separate us from other species even as they urge emotional identification. In the process, empathy, the binding and unifying force *par excellence*, is converted into its opposite, a distancing mechanism that instrumentalizes the animal form for the sake of momentary emotional gratification. The viewer is moved to project sentimental significance onto a scene that simultaneously undermines the validity of the sentiment in question. Flach's animal images invite a wholly one-sided emotional event to take place. The affective experience they afford is cynical insofar as it is unashamedly self-centered. His photographs are the cardinal expression of a new set of emotional responses that have arisen in the dialectical interaction between a consumption-powered media machine and the target audience whose desires it both reflects and structures. In Balázs' words: "Aesthetic taste is a self-defense mechanism of the spiritual organism. Even the tastes of a class are an expression of the struggle for that class's survival. Taste is ideology."[35]

To adapt the famous phrase by Benjamin, Flach's animals represent sentiment in the age of its digital proliferation. Changes in the technological conditions of producing and disseminating images have entailed changes in the collective configuration of visual perception. Flach's photography, in its factorization through the distributive arms of *Getty Images*, can be understood as a carefully crafted prosthetic replacement for meaningful emotional exchange. To the extent that spectators look at Flach's pictures and suspend disbelief, they enter into a technologically-assisted process of narcissistic self-projection. As *concept maps*, his

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[35] Balázs, *Der Geist Des Films*, 145.

images can be understood as commodified guides to visual apperception assisting the public imaginary to envisage trends whose impact, though already felt, are only beginning to be articulated in graphic form.

Flach's anthropomorphic style of photography is in sync with *Getty Images*' ambition to serve as a centralized mechanism for boosting consumption through emotional manipulation. In pumping subliminal positivity, like citrus aroma, into the marketplace, *Getty Images* is fundamentally transforming the diet of images we, the seeing and consuming public, ingest on a daily basis as we walk down the street, do our shopping, surf the internet, etc. We neither see the progeny of the images bombarding us nor are we aware that these images may be gradually, and imperceptibly, recalibrating our emotional literacy. As Benjamin observes:

> The masses are a matrix out of which all habitual understandings with respect to works of art are currently emerging newly born. Quantity has switched into quality: the much larger number of participants has resulted in a different kind of participation.[36]

Stephen Mayes likens stock photography to "a cultural stream of consciousness: "it is hardly considered and yet it is all around us, a mirror that seems to reflect the world but which actually reflects our ideas of how we would like the world to be."[37] Mayes's *apercue* draws attention to the ubiquity of commercial imagery and its cohesive nature. Yet his claim that the mirror "reflects our ideas of how we would *like* to the world to be" is tendentious. To the extent that stock photography can be compared to a mirror at all, it is a mirror that deliberately distorts and selectively filters the information it transmits. In believing that the desires portrayed in stock-land

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[36] Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk Im Zeitalter Seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," 165.

[37] Stephen Mayes, "Through the Looking Glass (Darkly)," *i SAY (Photo District News NY)* (2001).

are, indeed, our own authentic desires reflected back at us, we are succumbing to the lure of the *topical* over the *medial*.

Flach's animal photography is but one vector of change in the silent transformation of our visually-mediated emotional responses. Yet, by probing the symbolic content of his images, spectators can learn to recognize how emotional identification with these animals may be rendering them affectively susceptible to values operative in an increasingly global society – values whose implications for the organization of regional public spaces and social institutions they may not want to endorse uncritically.

VIII. Conclusion

By occasioning a psychological event in the spectator – in this case, seeing human attributes in animal forms – Flach's *concept maps* enable us to experience ourselves, momentarily, as *perceiving* animals comprehending the environment through strata of emotional projection. The photograph below summarizes, by way of visual metaphor, the anthropomorphic faculty characterizing the human animal and so assiduously cultivated throughout Flach's portfolio of work. Instead of projecting human qualities onto an animal model, this photograph of a man's neck and shoulders invites spectators to reflect on the phenomenal reality of being human, and the propensity to see physiognomical monsters, speaking with Balázs, where there are only shadows. And the reverse also holds true; we are prone to see only shadows where there may lurk ideological monsters.

By now it should be abundantly clear that there is something fishy about animals, especially as portrayed by Flach. Thinking with them we invariably seem to allegorize about ourselves. Balázs attributes the singular magic of animals on film to their un-self-conscious immediacy:

> The particular thrill of observing animals on film consists in knowing that they are not playing at something, but actually living. They know nothing about the apparatus and strut their stuff with naïve earnestness. Even when their performance is drilled, only we know that it is theater. They don't demur and are deadly serious about everything. Every actor's aim is to arouse the illusion that his grimaces are no mere "impersonations," but rather the expression of authentically present feeling. Yet no actor is able to outdo the animals in this respect. The latter know no illusion, only real facts. All artifice is absent, we are eavesdropping on nature.[38]

But again Balázs seems to have succumbed to the subliminal process he seeks to examine. Consistent with his own critical media theory, a more accurate conclusion would have been, "All artifice *seems* absent, we *feel* as if we were eavesdropping on nature." This subtle distinction must be born in mind if we want to enjoy the complex resonance of Flach's digital beasts without falling prey to the powers they unwittingly serve.

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[38] Balázs, *Der Geist Des Films*, 76.

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