Strathern bottle
On topology, ethnographic theory, and the method of wonder

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In effect, Funes not only remembered every leaf on every tree of every wood, but even every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it. . . . He was, let us not forget, almost incapable of general, platonic ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term DOG embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front).

Jorge Luis Borges, *Funes the Memorious*

The Melanesian world is one where people constantly take themselves by surprise.

Marilyn Strathern, “Artifacts in history”

Umberto Eco (1992: 50) once called “excess of wonder” that perceptual regime which overestimates the importance of coincidences and relentlessly traces relations between signs. The Hermetic tradition and the doctrine of *signatures* in the Renaissance were, perhaps, the most notorious examples of this way of seeing. That was an age where everything could be (and often was) connected to anything else by either resemblance or contiguity; occult parenthood and analogic kinship, for example, allowed a malleable system of equivalences and transitivity where connections, rather than being severed, were augmented and magnified. The exterior hailed the interior: clouds mirrored ponds and rivulets of rains encompassed a
circulatory system. The form would contain the function: the plant *orchis* was named after its two spheroid bulbs, resembling testicles, and its properties could affect the reproductive apparatus. This was a putative universe where function, embedded in morphology, was ready to be revealed to the trained eye, a cosmos where Hermes ruled on a multiplicity of hidden *Gestalten* and *signata* as the god of knowledge, yet also of trickery. It is not by chance that the mnemotechniques of that age were drawn on imagined canvases or erected in arenas where scale-free relations of disproportional analogy were traced—a *metisica fantastica* which Giulio Camillo, for example, employed to generate a *Theater of Memory*, an imagistic synecdoche which beautifully, albeit frenetically, contained and replicated on a human scale a larger cosmological model (here Ernst Cassirer or Frances Yates could speak with eloquence to our own cosmological and ontological turns and movements). Thus it is not surprising that Eco (1988) also mused wittingly that an *ars oblivionalis*—a technology of forgetting—could not be developed semiotically through homology and connotation, but only by multiplication: one would forget not on account of defects of semiosis, but excess of synonyms and relations. What, then, happens when an *ant* can stand for *Providence* by hieroglyphic resemblance, when analogy, contiguity, and homology may be potentially extended *ad infinitum* and distinctions of this flow of similarities are not drawn properly? Setting aside a timely reflection on the cropping up of academic humbugs and potentially new Sokal affairs (threatening to befall upon us at any moment) one could ask: what happens when knowledge is not produced or *consumed* properly? Perhaps the flow of vital resemblances would then turn into poison, knowledge into paranoia. After all, is not the paranoid the one who sees associations everywhere, or to put it better—the one who does not know any *opacity* of mind, a master in discerning an occult relationship where others would only infer the work of so-called *magic*?

Notably, in 1977, Roy Wagner commenced his seminal article on “analogic kinship” with a daring axiom recalling the Hermetic perceptual regime: “let us begin with the proposition that all human relationships are analogous to one another” (1977: 623). The domain glossed as “kinship” would then be nothing else but the crucial human capacity for differentiation, for creatively channelling or severing this
flow of vital analogies. Indeed, kinship could be defined as the act of 
creatively joining or “cutting” the flows deemed to be innate in a 
society. What the lectures you are about to read show is Marilyn 
Strathern’s masterful strategy of performing another creative trick: 
revealing the human flow of relationships by wonder. The trick, 
however, is that Strathern is being isomorphic to her own object of 
“study,” since what makes a theory ethnographic is the art of mimesis
in methods for knowing the Other, where the observer imitates an 
agent of study and is recursively affected by the process. The outcome 
that such a “negative strategy”—to use Strathern’s (1990b) own 
expression—aims to produce by juxtaposing images and perspectives 
is dazzlingly analogic to the Melanesian perceptual regime itself: it
unfolds through surprise. This is ethnographic theory as its best.

Take the event, a category with a long and distinctive pedigree in 
anthropology. One could, for example, take an event as a chancy 
occurrence to be explained in a historical (or mythopactical context). 
Alternatively, one could consider an event as an image, an 
(ethnographic) effect, and reflect on what it conceals and contains. 
Each image-event could then appear as a succession of forms and 
displacements, a series of substitutions (and performances) where 
time is not chronological but organic, since an image is capable to 
presentify past and future at once. And since performance is dual, 
one needs another perspective and gaze to be capable to see what an 
image-event contains and “cut” the analogical flows of the happenings 
which could be imaginatively associated. A good witness, then, would 
be a master of cutting and extracting—and “seeing,” a by-product of an 
extractive economy, since images are reified and produced in order to 
be consumed. Still, one can consume an event and all relationships 
embedded within it only by “seeing” things properly. The trick, 
though, is that a sender / producer can make an image to be seen 
properly only by eliciting in a recipient / consumer a particular level 
of attention. In other words, by wearing a mask or depicting oneself, 
one wants to elicit a specific response by an ideal observer, and one 
does this by catching the observer by surprise, by making him 

wonder: “Gavagai!” shouts the native to Quine’s (1960) puzzled 
imaginary ethnographer when a rabbit runs through the grass,

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1. I here refer readers to Copeman and Street (in press) where the idiom of 
surprise in the work of Marilyn Strathern is expounded brilliantly.
pointing the ethnographer’s attention to an image that can be *extracted* as either a substance [Yet which? Rabbit? Grass?] or an event. “See me properly!” thinks the Hagener. What comes after is best described by Strathern in her own words. What the ethnographer—and the Hagener—draw upon is:

an emotional pause, a sense of amazement or surprise, a small shock, disappointment or even a sensation of self-dislike, but in any event an unexpected openness of sensibility. It is that openness of sensibility that often creates the conditions of cathexis, that is, of how the subject (the fieldworker) connects with or identifies with—recognises—an issue or concern of significance. So it suddenly seems that this [issue or concern] is a key to everything else—if this could be resolved or understood then others things would fall into place too! (Strathern 2010: 80)

Or elsewhere, in one of her seminal methodological pieces:

But the point is that the development of the idea cannot simply be attributed to the nature of the societies being studied. *They cannot be the only source of the metaphoric power of the images,* that is why certain associations appear essential, intrinsic, why it would be unthinkable not to consider the kula a species of gift exchange. That sense of having uncovered what is distinctive about a particular region lies also in the manner in which anthropological ideas are organized. I suggest that instances of cathexis are created at moments when the invention of concepts in local ethnographic contexts re-arranges conceived notions, thus bouncing back off the assumptions which inform metropolitan theory. *Very often this takes the form of a negation or inversion of a relationship between familiar terms.* As we know, Mauss’ original impetus was a critique of utilitarian morality. Such invention simultaneously makes re-arrangement possible by creating an externalizing referent: the new ideas are seen to have their source elsewhere, embedded in a context intrinsic to them. (Strathern 1990b: 205, emphasis added)

The candid lectures that follow illustrate (with the help of beautiful images, yet within the limitations of the written word) the Melanesian extractive economy of wonder. We should not be jolted that Strathern decided to employ *wonder as method.* “Wonder” is not another example of gobbledygook like “affective entanglements” or other “uncanny” or “unformed” objects spawned by the Postmodernism Generator; rather, it upholds quite a distinctive and vibrant intellectual tradition. (Indeed, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park’s *Wonders*
and the order of nature, 1150–1750 would be a nice companion to this Masterclass.) On its own merit, the term could be a subject of investigation like mana or soul: “wonder” (Fr. l’admiration) was a passion eventually disposed of by Rene Descartes (1649), who, like Eco, was afraid of its excess (l’estonnement). Yet famed is the Platonic observation that philosophy is grounded in wonder (thaumazein). Jacques Le Goff’s (1985) brilliant analysis of the “medieval imagination” shows how mirabilia—“the marvelous”—in time became an analytical category that the Christian orthodoxy employed to tame and contain the unpredictable and alien, along with another containing strategy named “aestheticization.” Or, consider Francis Bacon, who called for a “substantial and severe collection of the heterochites or irregulars of Nature, well examined and described” (1605: II, 1.3), an intimation saluted by the Wunderkammer, the Stranger-cabinet which emerged in the mid-sixteenth century to contain and relate the most wondrous of all objects.

Thus where many have found difficulty in ascertaining the tenor or intent of Marilyn Strathern’s writing in masterpieces like The gender of the gift (1988) or Partial connections (1991), most have also missed this strategy of the wondrous, which aims to re-produce that isomorphism that happens in dances or other “aesthetic performances”: that moment of enchantment, which holds the field-worker captive. Alfred Gell (1992) has indeed named “enchantment” that halo-effect produced by anything that appears as being beyond the capacity of apprehension of an individual and requires recourse to a network of intentionalities, a collective. Recalling Georg Simmel, Gell notes that value is a function of resistance which one must overcome in order to gain access to an object. Thus, if one assumes that “production” could be achieved by either technical activity or “work” and magic, then the two means of production operate conterminously in a sort of figure-ground reversal, where “magic is the negative contour of work,” or technical competence; in other words, magic obliterates the difficulties and hazards entailed by technical activity (1992: 58). Thus, in Melanesian gardening, magic constitutes the ideal cum “occult” technology (concealed, disguised, veiled) which guarantees effortless production.

Marilyn Strathern is the Mistress of Enchantment in such inception, yet what she does is not a “theory”—sensu stricto—but a series of mental tricks to make relations visible, to illustrate by
juxtapositions how people (Melanesians, for example) make themselves explicitly—and dazzingly—visible. It is a cosmoeconomics which sees images as condensed meanings, as events which have to be consumed and produced “properly.” Ultimately, the medium of the message is involved in the production of the proper image-event. I always thought Strathern felt a sense of inadequacy with the written word and her reception, and one of the reasons she enjoyed these lectures was the opportunity to produce wonder by a succession of images. She seemed at home with her slides. In that dark seminar room in Free School Lane she could finally perform her magic of juxtaposition.

Whereas some have mistaken Strathern’s method of wonder for opacity (yet another characteristic of the Melanesian mind), others may have missed that her work also reveals a nifty exercise in topology: the conception that discrete and detached entities may remain nonetheless continuous and entangled, a geometry where shapes and forms maintain their essential properties and substance even if stretched and contorted. In Strathern’s Wunderkammer, the environment is within, relations do not join but separate, one’s own storage is external, the contained overhauls the container, a child “grows” the mother, one hides in order to show.

But Strathern’s fascination for conceptual and spatial topologies is not novel: it pays homage to a neglected tradition of ethnographic theory that untimely anticipated the more famous Lacanian and Deleuzian post-structuralist concerns for knots, planes, and lines of flight. Besides Gregory Bateson’s plateaus and Roy Wagner’s fractal person, memorable examples are Edmund Leach’s (1961) Malinowski lecture where the linear logic of kinship is questioned not through the regularities of genealogical patterns but via a “neighborhood system” of “controlled” and “uncontrolled” mystical influences and forces. “A society is not an assemblage of things but an assemblage of variables,” Leach writes, “analogical to topology. . . . If I have a rubber sheet and draw a series of lines on it to symbolize the functional interconnections of some set of social phenomena and I then start stretching the rubber about, I can change the manifest shape of my original geometrical figure out of all recognition and yet clearly there is a sense in which it is the same figure all the time” (Leach 1961: 7). Topology returns in the spatial metamorphosis and inversions of Lévi-Strauss’ Petite mythologiques:
from the reversal enacted by the construct of the house which puts “two into one,” replacing internal duality with external unity ([1975] 1982: 184), to the containers of The jealous potter ([1985] 1988), where the maker-cause of a craft is transformed into her product and the canonical formulas of myth leaves place to the image of the Klein bottle—a container where one cannot determine whether a point is located inside or outside. Like the Klein bottle, the distorted nature / culture perplex, like the interfacing of the two genders, has neither an inside nor an outside, or rather, depending on one’s point of view, it is all inside and outside and nothing else. Similarly, the Strathern Bottle tries to incorporate both the Ego and the Alter, to bifurcate identity and otherness contemporaneously, to show how and why holding two perspectives at once is all that matters: like the images of production and consumption, society and individuals happen at the same time, they entail each other simultaneously. These apparent—wondrous—paradoxes also ground Aristotle’s notion of education as entertainment, for what he meant by that much-abused term is that the teacher “entertains” her students by confronting them with propositions that they can neither accept or reject, and then inviting them to play with them.2 By entertaining her readers in this ludic dimension, Strathern teaches wonder. Hence the double-edged intrigue of the Strathern bottle—what we could call the “uncertainty” principle of anthropology. How does one enter a Strathern bottle, an object for which one hardly knows where to find oneself on the “inside” or the “outside” of a native? How can an “ethnographic topology” contribute to debates in social theory? How can wonder become a methodology to account for alterity?

Proceed, oh reader, to enter with us into the Strathern Bottle.

II

Learning to see in Melanesia unfolds as a kaleidoscope, a linking of vision to sociality, image to the social imagination, symbol to object, and object to praxis. Lecture one, “Feathers and shells: Learning to see,” sets the tone for the Masterclass by moving between contexts (the “photographer’s gallery,” ritual performances, the “anthropological” setting)—and, indeed, questioning the very analytic value of

2. I should very much thank Roy Wagner for this insight.
“context” itself—in order to think through the paradoxes of how Melanesian persons can be concealed and revealed, exposed and hidden, at once. The emphasis on Mt. Hagen in this lecture will remind attentive readers of the author’s early work on self-decoration among Hagener—and, no doubt, will provoke new interpretations and questions. Lecture two, “Axes and canoes: Traveling objects,” follows the visual and social life of artifacts out into the broader Melanesian world, raising further questions about objectification, perspective, witness, appearance, stasis, flow, and spectatorship for a Strathernian visual theory. Lecture three, “Netbags and masks: Containers,” continues to explore the visual qualia of artifacts, but now turns to Mt. Ok and Sepik (among other places) in order to focus on a specific genre of objects: those that contain (or hold, leak, or limit) social relations. Lecture four, “Wig / shell / tree: Hiding forms,” circles back to the questions of concealment and revelation discussed in Lecture one. By the end, the reader not only has a dynamic visual theory—a living illustration, both indigenous and anthropological—but also a vision of personhood, objectification, and even cosmology.

We also include three appendices in this Masterclass. These are reprints of classic articles that represent some of the author’s more public disseminations of ideas that developed in tandem with this lecture series. While remaining grounded in Melanesian ethnography, each essay takes up themes of general and comparative anthropological interest. Appendix one, “Artifacts of history: Events and the interpretation of images,” raises questions of temporality, materiality, the nature of events, and the historical imagination. Appendix two, “Social relations and the idea of externality,” showcases the author’s topological engagement with archaeology and material culture, further developing concepts of symbolic storage, containership, and the social topologies of interiority and exteriority, built out of (and in relations between) objects and persons. The final appendix, “Environments within: An ethnographic commentary on scale,” is a compendium to the former essay and closes the Masterclass with an exquisite discussion of scale change, unpredictability, landscape, and the meaning of context and environment. In toto and in wonder, the volume teaches us not only how to see in Melanesia, but how to see anthropology anew.
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References


