Wig / shell / tree: Hiding forms

It will be obvious that what I have presented [as a narrative and the assertions contained therein] has been a string of interpretations on my part—trying to turn images around for you, using the English language of course. This lecture concludes with a sequence that will turn certain images around through something like an indigenous commentary. That turning around is going to depend less on words than on how images are placed or located in relation to one another.

So I introduce directionality. And it is a directionality that is bound up with the movement of objects, and of vision, between persons. Think of a map with its fixed directions. However you hold it, you are oriented north—a point that fixes the viewer, too (a version of Euro-American perspectivalism). Yet, in these Melanesian instances, I have been talking about the way objects move between people and are carried by them. And even how people may be in two places at the same time: “I am within the encompassing circle of my village / I am at the center of his village.” Of course that is my formula—using spatial terms to produce a paradox. An English-speaker’s view of place is possible (in part) because places don’t travel. They stay put, and one can only be in one place at a time. What I want to underline is precisely the possibility of imagining people occupying different places at the one time, as though they were at opposite ends of a compass, or conversely in themselves held two diametrically positioned places. And to suggest this is part of the image-maker’s visual theory.

Sometimes we find this being made explicit, insofar as people play with form, as is very evident on the part of the Barok of New Ireland as described by Roy Wagner. At one point in their secondary mortuary
rituals, they uproot a forest tree, bring it into a central plaza, and replant it—but they replant it upside down, with the roots in the air. Clearly deliberately; clearly made to be seen; clearly a display. The tree that was originally pointing in one direction now points in another. And the tree is hung about with persons—so it is the directions in which people are facing that are also twisted around. It is as though this display were enacting an exchange of perspectives. What people do with their artifacts includes putting *themselves* into the position of seeing things differently. Reversing expectations: here is a deliberate attempt to present what is visible as reversible.

**A diversion on the interpretative exercise**

[Added note: This set of lectures has clearly not been an exercise in the anthropological tradition of exegesis. For the labor of interpretation I have, as already noted, substituted a narrative. It suggests that those to whom I was speaking might see things in one way but could be shown another. (I comment briefly on that at the end of this last lecture.) The narrative is presented as though there were no problems with apprehending what is happening, and proceeds without pointing to the vast critical apparatus of symbolic interpretation to which the 1970s and 1980s were heir. However, for students in the 1990s and 2000s, for whom the art of explicit interpretation had more or less disappeared with the attenuation of “symbolic anthropology,” I could not resist one or two simple pointers. The narrative also rests on a visual device probably only suitable for face-to-face interaction, as in a spoken lecture. Face-to-face because the device consisted of no more than the passage of time involved, and thus a sequencing to what was being imparted, this relying in turn on holding people’s attention from one moment to the succeeding moment. To reproduce this as text, even part-text, is another matter. It should be added that in the descriptions that follow we find the ethnographers in question making visual interpretations of their own.]

You can’t ask people. They are not going to tell you. It would be like me asking you [heads down, sitting in the room writing notes]: What are you doing when you are writing? I am just writing! But why are you doing an “A” like that? That is the way you write an “A.” Why are “As” written like that? That is how it is. But this “A” doesn’t look like that “A.” It doesn’t matter! But surely it must matter? . . . And so forth. You can imagine the
ethnographer asking: what does it mean to write by analyzing the number of times a person uses a pen or a pencil or prefers one letter to another.

It is obvious that anthropologists have various procedures for interpretation and they once loomed large as part of the regular taught curriculum (all there, for example, in Radcliffe Brown’s 1922 *Andaman Islanders*), such as contextualization and cross-reference. Let me quickly note three. (1) Looking at a pattern, so as to understand one item by reference to various others, may mean finding a pattern in other items or actions either in the “same” milieu or else across them, as across [what we otherwise delineate as] “contexts” or “cultures.” (Example: how one understands the practice of mortuary ceremonies.) (2) To consider similar items in terms of the language of signs (semiotics) or decisions as to similarity and difference, which all have to remain within a single cultural milieu. (How people treat trees—all the occasions on which they cut down trees. Are they a kind of immobile canoe? Full of people? Does it point to other usage of trees?) (3) What people do with objects as things: how can the properties that things present be deployed or acted upon (so a thing encodes its own context of use); what rules does an item itself contain? Within the one artifact? (What is the internal relationship between the roots and branches?)

[Added note: Each of these presupposes what it seeks to explain, but deploys different strategies to do so.] Let’s take these as guiding elements in what follows. (1) Approaching one item by reference to others may be “across” cultures so, as I have done before, I am going to take three artifacts from three quite different parts of Papua New Guinea. In each case I shall (2) look at “similar” items—that is, take a decision as to similarity and difference—within each one of these milieux or contexts. We shall also consider (3) what people feel they can do with [objects as] things and thus how something creates its own context.

The three artifacts taken up now entail a sense of directionality; each in fact requires that the object has to be seen (made visible) in relation to others, and each incidentally is to do with the succession of the generations, and thus with relations between youth and age. First one direction is evident and then multiple directions appear together. Thus the Huli wig displays only one direction [though it has two poles] at a time. A shell valuable from Wiru allows a viewer to see more than one direction simultaneously. The mortuary tree from Barok [mentioned above] combines both possibilities, moving from the one position to the other position; the power of the last image is that it is as though
people were commenting on the effect of images as such, presenting an indigenous interpretation of what it means to be a witness.

Two wigs from Huli

Figure 68. A portrait by Kirk of Mokai, from Huli (Piribu) in the Southern Highlands Province (between 1967–80). See figure 7 for a detail. Non-display “everyday” apparel: a *manda tene* wig [see figure 70], though with the bird’s crest not upturned. Photograph: Malcolm Kirk. [Reproduced with author’s permission.]

Start with the portrait gallery once again, and a photograph from Kirk. A man from Huli, in the Southern New Guinea Highlands.
[Now] let us compare “like” with “like.”

Figure 69. A Huli (Southern Highlands) man wearing the ceremonial display-mode *manda hare* wig; see figure 71. Photograph: source unknown.

Another man, same cultural background (Huli), different occasion. [This is not one of Kirk’s photographs.]
There are apparent similarities and differences between the two sets of decorations. Yellow face for black; differently shaped wig. In fact, we can say the wig encodes its own context: each [type of] wig refers to the other, not just by way of distinction or opposition but because each anticipates or contains the other. So let us look at the two wigs more closely. [As given in Laurence Goldman’s account, based on work in 1997–98. In his orthography, the “a” in *manda* (see below) is marked as having a high-falling tone.] Both wigs are made to be seen. However, between them they refer to a movement between “non-display” and “display.” In the former case, the wig displays a moment of non-display. Only the second kind of wig is for “display” in a marked sense. Coded here is [for men] the passage from youth to adult [from the process of attaining power and knowledge to their achievement]. Time or growth is part of the difference between the two forms.

The Huli *manda tene* wig.

![Diagram of the Huli *manda tene* wig](image)

**Figure 70.** The down-turned *manda tene* (“first hair”), with traditional upturned bird’s crest (*yagama*). Huli, Ialuba Valley, Southern Highlands. 1977–78. Diagram: Laurence Goldman. [Reproduced with author’s permission.]

Graduation in cult status for Huli youths [young bachelors] was marked by the arrangement of hair. Initially novices wore *manda tene* (“first hair”) with charcoal as facial decor (as in figure 68). It became part of the mature man’s everyday (non-display) apparel. “Boy” initiates formerly underwent ritual purification, cleansing the body and eyes of
female pollution. This was the Huli version of the bachelor cult [as in Paiela, Lecture One], effecting the young men’s transition from immature to mature. That the wig carries this message is significant since the forehead is associated with knowledge, and the transformation carries with it the capacity to make speeches in public. (The quality of speech should be consonant with the outward display, for to speak boys’ words from a man’s head is to make a fool of oneself.)

The Huli *manda hare* wig.

![Diagram of the *manda hare* wig.](image)

**Figure 71.** The upturned *manda hare* (“red hair”), with traditional down-turned bird’s crest (*yagama*). Huli, Ialuba valley, Southern Highlands. 1977–78. Diagram: Laurence Goldman. [Reproduced with author’s permission.]

When fully fashioned the wig is called *manda hare* (“red hair,” colored with red ocher): it signifies the attainment of strength and power inherent in the life-blood of the cult [now put behind], and is imbued with the potency of the cult’s progenitor (a woman). (See figure 69.) (The Paiela boys in seclusion were “grown” by a female spirit.) The wig shows the heat—blood—potency that they have now absorbed and appropriated. [Technically speaking, the “hair” that was first cultivated and could be worked in either of the styles, was not cut and made into a wig until the man had finally emerged from the cult.]
The transformation from immature to mature is frozen in the two wig types, either of which men may wear in the open, so they present themselves in one of two forms, young or old. [Added note: There may be other appearances in the way men dress, but I say “form” to indicate a deliberate presentation / alternation of properties.] The colors black / red offer a binary opposition between impotence and potency, the shape of the wigs between non-display and display or the everyday and ceremonial. To this I add—you will see why later—what is complete or incomplete.

Now one wig is closed down, the other is opened up. The different directions (up / down) point to two different times. A man can only wear one wig at a time (depending on the kind of occasion), yet we’ve seen that each contains within it reference to the other. Look at the alternative placings of the blue Superb Bird of Paradise “crest” feathers (“a child”; children are eulogized as this bird) in the center of the wig, at the forehead. The up / down directions [of the crest feathers and the shape of the wig] were traditionally reversed. [Added note: The display mode of these blue feathers on the non-display *manda tene* shows what lies ahead in men’s efforts to attain power; their non-display mode on the display *manda hara* signifies men’s reticence in boasting of their accomplishments—one is praised by others, not by oneself.]

In sum, from the point of view of the wearer, a man only wears one [wig] at a time; yet the spectator sees two forms together. Each form is one of a pair . . . each also references the other, and thus makes the pair visible. In the past, the down-pointing wig had an up-pointing “child,” while the up-pointing wig had a down-pointing “child.” The boy becoming / to be produced as a man is procreatively the same as the man who will produce a boy. So any particular direction contains the other within it.

That having been said, note that—through the relationship between the head and the body displayed as standing upright—the relationship between up and down or top and bottom, pointing to the sky and pointing to the ground, is fixed. [The directional alternatives move between these two poles.]
Diagram 1. Schematic depiction of one-way directionality in the Huli wig, where the relationship between up and down is fixed; although each type of wig contains its opposite, the direction (top / bottom) remains stable.
Two shells from Wiru

Here [for the Southern Highlands Wiru] we encounter open and closed shells (my epithets). It seems that a contrast between open and closed operates as a similar kind of coordinate to up and down, namely, to what is displayed and what is normally hidden. The objects themselves are rendered either as incomplete, productive and creative, or as complete and the outcome of others’ productive or creative effort. [Added note: the ethnographer refers briefly to the first of two shells about to be described as “open-ended” and the other as “complete,” like an egg—I have extended the references.]

What I call the open shell, Wiru (*maiyo*).

**Figure 72.** The *maiyo* pearshell and its parts. The *pouwe* rim covered with a white tree sap that turns black on setting may be interpreted as referring to semen, while the opposite rim (*tobe keli*) is associated with femaleness and the womb, and with the color yellow; the line and dot marking are of a beetle that is yellow in its larval stage. The *pouwe* rim is also called the shell’s “head,” its horns “legs.” Wiru, Takuru village, Pangia, Southern Highlands Province. Early 1980s. Drawing: unnamed Wiru artist, drawn for the ethnographer. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

This is the ordinary shell that travels, moving in life-cycle exchanges (for example, in this virilocal context, to mother’s kin in payment for a
child’s body), separating persons and events in space and time. Where—in which direction—is it going? It depends on how you hold it . . . where you are in its travels. Movement: because you can see a shell as either coming or going in its travels, coming or going between exchange partners. For the shell itself points in either, or any, direction: only whether you see it as a donor or recipient (or as a witness to a transaction) will it tell you its direction. [We might speak of this as] a visual effect; the direction in which people are looking is the discriminatory device. [Added note: While an alternation between “away from oneself” and “towards oneself” could be seen as the two poles of a single direction, the shell is (so to speak) not directed in itself, does not point to that—it could be either, or altogether other, and one only knows by other means.]

The maiyo shell has an explicit iconography [as Jeffrey Clarke elucidates (fieldwork in 1980s)], with its yellow color and black-red rim (the latter comes from a white resin that turns black on exposure, and is painted red): a female inner body and male outer form, inside and outside together. The whole is washed over with red ocher, signifying male endeavor as well as blood ties between men (a mother creates flesh and bones; male semen binds both womb blood and [yellow] female substance to give the child a form). This open shell can turn inwards or outwards (toward one / away from one), or be going elsewhere, and thus encloses multiple directions of movement within it. In this sense, like the Huli wigs, each contains alternative viewpoints. In moving between persons, it is meant to be seen. For it is movement that makes the shell reproductive; one shell may be “going in” or “coming out” of another [my gloss].

However, in addition, Wiru elaborate a difference between movement and nonmovement in comparing the open exchange maiyo with another kind of shell. Hence [they also deploy] what I call a closed shell: when it is closed it is not elicited by anyone, is not travelling, and is in effect kept hidden and immobile: in short, it is ordinarily not meant to be seen. Any sequence (of acts, transactions) is finished. In terms of the Huli wig, it is the youth as the outcome of men’s activities who is complete and thus [I would say] closed, like a fetus inside a mother. In terms of Wiru shell decoration, it is old age and death that is depicted as a completion.
The special “closed” shell, Wiru (*yobo maiyo*).

**Figure 73.** The *yobo maiyo* shell, with references to procreation (the pearshell sliver is a “child”; the shell’s skirt, the painted barkcloth that “completes” it, is of the kind worn by unmarried girls seeking partners) and death (necklaces from the seeds woven into the skirt are worn in mourning). Wiru, Takuru village, Pangia, Southern Highlands Province. Early 1980s. Drawing: presumed as in figure 72. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

The potent (*maiyo*) shell is the incomplete one that always moves to find a partner; it is open to another. But the closed *yobo maiyo* shell is in a sense already completed, is already partnered (two bodies have already been brought together). This special shell is kept in houses to help other shells “grow” (also occasionally used in war compensation but never for kin-based life cycle payments). The closed shell is associated with death, with once powerful men now deceased, or “finished,” for they have already produced children in their stead.
Diagram 2. Schematic depiction of movement (multi-directionality) and nonmovement (directionality stopped) indicated in the two Wiru pearshells.
Iconographically, [the shell mount consists of] a barkcloth board that is both red and black, with references to death (incorporating bits of a deceased’s leg bands or mourning necklaces [coix lacrymae]). It is thought to resemble a woman’s skirt. The ethnographer points out its likeness to a child-carrying bilum (netbag): Wiru speak of the pearlshell sliver [on the shell’s rim] as a “child” of its pearlshell mother. [Added note: It appears in the drawing hanging down, but could equally be imagined as at the forehead or center of the shell’s “head.”] The secret of the closed pearlshell [reddened with ocher] is that inside the red and yellow inner body (blood and female substance) is a white child. [From what Clarke says, with reference to figure 73] we may imagine the yobo maiyo as two shells or two sets of legs meeting one another, and imagine them as doing so productively or creatively. Yet the production / creation has already happened: the shell is already completed by the skirt / bilum.
Diagram 3. Comparison of certain Huli and Wiru forms.

[Added note: I did not draw attention to the similar / different clustering of values in the comparison.]
This was the juncture at which I circulated in class a Wiru maiyo shell, which had been kept in a painted black and red bark pouch but was itself free-standing. Only when it was worn or given did the legs point in a specific direction, that is, and these are my extrapolations, when it was “completed” by the wearer (worn on the chest, with the legs upwards to frame the head) or by an exchange partner (to whom the legs would carry it).

The Barok mortuary tree

In looking at “similar” items, the observer has to take a decision as to similarity and difference; so how do we ever know what is “the same?” The Usen Barok of New Ireland, from Roy Wagner’s fieldwork in 1979–80, propose some surprises.

In this matrilineal context, a men’s house enclosure ordinarily contains the feasts that people organize (inside the fence). The layout of the courtyard uses the relative positions of front / back and above / below to delineate coordinates of time and space. So it lays out all four points at once (front / back / above / below).
Here is the men’s house enclosure or courtyard (*taun*) (Usen Barok), with its rectangular stone wall, the house itself in the center. The fore part is the feasting space, including a display table. The entrance is a stile carved from a tree—"the gate of the pig."
say is like the upper part of a tree. At the rear is the burial ground. Barok say this is like the roots of a tree below ground—the roots of the clan, fixed in ground. Ancestors are buried there, indeed like the root of a tree, while its branches above ground indicate its capacity to give feasts. At a feast, the distribution of food takes place from the rear to the front, that is, from the enclosure within the courtyard to the outside. Pigs are laid out pointing to outside the enclosure, lined up facing outwards. In this ordinary courtyard, a man is inside the enclosure, with the trestle table piled up with food. It has been drawn by Wagner as though it can also be seen as on top of the “branches” of the stile. This is a visual cue, as we’ll find out.

Now at a funeral (the first mortuary ceremony) these positions are reversed. Here the moiety organization is important, and the moiety of the deceased is fed by [members of] the other moiety. The event is still taking place within the taum (men’s house enclosure). However, all food for eating is brought into the enclosure from outside, and pigs (which have come from elsewhere) are turned towards the burial area—pointing in that direction, they are facing inwards. During this period the corpse is being absorbed by the ground. The deceased’s moiety is turned inward and is fed by the outside moiety. Then when the deceased is finally decomposed and part of the land, the men’s house opens itself up again and gives to others. Direction is reversed once more. The pigs are now placed facing outwards toward the gate, and distribution is from the rear toward the front again. Pigs come from the taum. Death is complete: the men turn to feeding others again. [Wagner refers to feasts succeeding each other in this way as “closed” and “open.”]

Subsequently, however, when much later a great feast (a second mortuary ceremony) is held in memory of several who have died, something else happens. Now the actions go outside the taum. A tree is set up outside the enclosure, like a huge commentary on all these directional operations. The men deliberately manipulate the co-ordinates to which they had been adhering.

[Still with figure 74.]

First, they transform the grounding image, from courtyard into tree. But then the courtyard was already a tree! It is a tree with spreading branches and roots, canopy above and root system below, the branches of men who propagate other lineages through their marriages and the
matrilineal roots of ancestry. So in the image of the courtyard you see
the matriclan and its fruit: its deceased ancestress and its young men—a
central core and spreading extensions—and there is no problem about
imagining these (courtyard, tree) simultaneously. The image keeps the
coordinates steady—front and back, up and down.

But [as Wagner makes clear] an image has its own coordinates—the
image is of the whole thing: the clan and the possibilities of
reproduction—and any part signals the rest. That is, wherever you start,
from the roots or from the branches, you are part of that totalizing
image. (There is no one vantage point.) And they tell themselves that, it
would seem! The Barok “trick” [they talk of tricks] is to show
themselves that one could as well be in one place as in another.

The upturned tree (Usen Barok).

Figure 75. “Rootstock mortuary feast” (una ya kaba) displaying a directional inversion
of the image of branch and rootstock. The ultimate power, the source of all things in
the world, is said to be that of image-transformation. Usen Barok, central New Ireland.
About 1979. Drawing: Roy Wagner. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]
So on this occasion men recapitulate the image of a tree supporting people, but turn it upside down. (The tree cut from the forest is planted with its roots [trimmed as the drawing shows] in the air.) Between these two different forms, the tree one way up and then another, people are transposed. One kind of person is [revealed as] also another kind of person. People are invited to switch their perception: to see that what is down can become up. Observers being invited to switch their perception enact a switch in their perception of other persons.

The men’s house enclosure (taun), ordinarily contains the feast (inside the fence). On this special occasion the feast is outside the men’s house; everything is laid out around the tree on top of which a young man stands. For the occasion will entail celebrating the death of [one or more] former big men, pointing to the kind of young “big men” (boys) who will take their place. The effect is to have produced one person out of another. It is done through making the old and the new appear at the same time. We come back to the realization that persons are contained by other persons: when you see a young man you also see a female ancestress; when you see a nubile girl you also see an out-marrying man. You could as well be looking at old or young, at male or female, at married or unmarried. Persons are distinguished only by the places they occupy, and the places have moved. Or put otherwise, when you look at a person you see a person in a particular form—young, male, initiate (say). But as a member of a clan group the capacity of that person to be effective in the world also shows that “he” (a clansman) is equally the female ancestress or nubile girl or middle-aged man who also make up its members. We may recall the Gawan canoe that is simultaneously a mother and a decorated youth.

One of Wagner’s early insights was that in a situation where people make presumptions about an innate similarity of identity, effort has to be directed to creating difference, keeping distinctions separate, such as between male and female, or there can be no productive / creative outcome [to life]. Hence all the rules and taboos that keep people apart, such as the interval in gift exchange. So the creation of temporal moments—two times of sociality—and the creation of distance between persons—dividing them off from one another—are deliberate efforts at demarcation. Then from time to time another truth is revealed: the fact that the differently demarcated reference points are all “the same.” It is as though people witness the coordinates changing places, that is,
places in movement. Those who witness the image are perhaps made to realize that their present status (young / old, male / female) is simultaneously substitutable and determining: you could see yourself as of another age or gender, and indeed you are these other (clan) selves, but you are also what you are at that particular moment in space and time.

**Why a visual theory?**

My comments are stimulated by [what English-speakers would call] the kinds of artifacts that Melanesians produce to be seen. (In some cases these artifacts have fallen into disuse; in some cases they are still being made.) Yet does what I have been saying really point to an indigenous visual theory? What would the elements be? Of course, they don’t need a theory [in this sense, there is not going to be “an indigenous visual theory”—that was always a question on a par with Kirk’s reflections on the power of his images]. Rather, the question is a way of formulating what the Euro-American anthropologist might need to construct as a theory in order to describe these artifacts, if only as a counterweight to what he or she otherwise takes for granted. The response has been in true Euro-American knowledge-making fashion that makes an assumption of difference here. What I am attributing to Papua New Guinean practices is part of an effort to get myself—ourselves—to “see” differently. The reward might be a second glimpse, this time of some of the premises from which men [a reminder that I have been dealing with largely male spectacle] there operate. In other words, and it cannot be said too many times, it is not that the world being constructed in these lectures is the world Melanesians see (these artifacts are not concerned with describing “a world”). It is that without such a construction “our” world (with which we are concerned) will be all that “we” do see. [I do not go into the recursivity here.] Here is a glimpse.
Figure 76. This is the kind of photograph that is “frequent and conventional in ethnographies” (Feld 2012: Plate 6, following p. 236) says Feld. Gaso of Bono clan, Kaluli, Southern Highlands Province. 1976–77. Photograph: Steven Feld. [Reproduced with author’s permission.]
This photograph of a Kaluli dancer traveling to a performance (Southern Highlands), the ethnographer says, is “frequent and conventional in ethnographies.” [He adds: it is an example of “conventional Western portraiture in a medium shot.” See comments on portraits and ethnographic realism in Lecture One.] But what relation does this have to the image the man presents?

Figure 77. Original caption: “Frozen in motion while dancing up and down the dark longhouse corridor, a dancer is seen as a ‘man in the form of a bird,’ kalu obe mise” (Feld 2012: Plate 7, following p. 236). Kaluli, Southern Highlands Province. 1976–77. Photograph: Steven Feld. [Reproduced with author’s permission.]

The photographer invents his own metaphor (image) to convey, he says, the metaphorical qualities or “aesthetic intent” of the danced display.

This second photograph was deliberately taken by Steven Feld to respond to a Kaluli spectator who spoke of how in the middle of a night of dancing, drowsy with it all, you suddenly open your eyes and see a bird—“a man in the form of a bird.” Not just because of the movement of the dance and the quality of the light, but because spectators are supposed to be in an altered emotional state themselves. Kaluli take this to extremes in one of their ceremonies at which dancers are invited by the hosts of the occasion to evoke their [the...
hosts’] feelings (for departed kin, for distant places). They are made to feel—emotion is drawn from them—while the dancers remain immobile and passive. Paying for being seen (Lecture Three): the Kaluli performer has to pay the spectator for his suffering, for being moved, altered, by the sad songs and the beautiful sight. [Added note: Conventionally the spectator-hosts weep and, as well as expecting compensation, take revenge for having their feelings elicited thus by branding the impassive dancers with torches.] The spectator plays back the power of the performer, a witness.

However the spectator has to be in the right subject-state to do so. Here is another glimpse.

Figure 78. Men imitating women’s “secret” ritual. Original caption: “Belying the assertions of men and women that the details of each other’s secret ritual performances are unknown to the opposite sex, young men dressed as female initiates enact in the forest a scene from the women’s ‘secret’ rites. They are rehearsing a mime to be performed at night inside the men’s house where male initiation rites (from which women are rigorously excluded) will be in progress” (Gillison 1980: 166). Gimi, Eastern Highlands Province. 1973–75. Photograph: David Gillison. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

Secrecy, hiding, precluding others from display, as when women are not allowed to see men’s sacred rites, has less to do with people being
kept ignorant than as to who qualifies as the right person to be a witness. In Gimi, men are excluded from women’s secret rites—scenes that no man would ever be allowed to see as a man. [Added note: This is because to see would imply their receptivity to certain kinds of knowledge, and they are not the appropriate vehicles for women’s knowledge. That does not mean they do not “know” about them in the way Euro-Americans might imagine knowledge as a matter of gaining information.] But here at the heart of an equally secret male initiation sequence men are mimicking what are not supposed to “know” about, namely a secret scene from women’s ritual.

Why are objects produced for display, or (for that matter) for non-display? Why is attention being paid to appearance—why do Melanesian men, and more often than women, carve, paint, dress up, dance? Whatever they do in other parts of their lives, are they not at that moment conveying the import of events, through protocols and aesthetic conventions, of which time is a significant element (only at certain times are objects brought out to be seen)? The point to make is that this is often far from a concern with procedures of representation, that is, with how to make “the world” known to oneself, where all the problems are with how to describe, analyze, model it, as anthropological knowledge-seekers do.
Figure 79. Looking inside oneself: imaging the effects of IVF. From Lennart Nilsson, *A child is born* (1990). The original description says: “The nurse shows the hopeful parents an enlarged image of their own fertilised ovum immediately before insertion into the woman’s uterus. The ovum has been cultured for two days in a nutrient solution, and has now divided into four cells” (Nilsson 1990: 200). [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

This slide is of a slide [I keep the reference to slides here, as the figures were originally shown], and one that is being interpreted, Euro-American style. [As the caption says] a nurse shows the hopeful couple an enlarged image of their own fertilized ovum before insertion into uterus. The egg has been cultivated for two days and is now divided into four cells.
Until the sixteenth week the whole fetus can be rendered visible, on a screen, through an ultrasound scan. The pictures are a visual translation of the ultrasound echo. Here sight is a means of access and supplier of raw material: there is something to be seen. [Added note: Interpreting an ultrasound “image” is notoriously difficult unless you already have some sense of what it is that you are going to “see.”] And when Euro-Americans interpret or depict what is seen, their comprehension becomes a means of organizing this piece of information about the world. [Which is what we have just been doing.] So that artifacts produced for display [as in these lectures] become a particular medium for conveying knowledge.
Learning to see in Melanesia: A summary

(1) Seeing as a deliberate activity

1.1. To see is to be affected—to take the image within implies emotional exposure.

1.2. On many occasions (as when initiates are shown sacra), people have to be already in a certain state to “see,” and to be prepared to receive the sight (regardless of whether they know, or have any interest in, what it “means”), while others may be categorically excluded.

(2) An invitation to witness

2.1. Persons may invite others to see them. They deliberately make objects for display, and persons may be objects in this sense, to be transformed by the way they are seen.

2.2. It may require a counterpart to identify oneself (exchange of perspectives).

2.3. Both reification and personification are techniques in creating objects of attention.

(3) The viewer in more than one place

3.1. Viewer may see him or herself in the displayer.

3.2. The view may be equally of an “outside” or of an “inside” (an audience encircling a dancer within; the dancer bringing “to the surface” what is inside outside).

(4) Directionality not a given, neither in space nor time.

4.1. One may see two forms at the same time through switching, as between:


(These do not add up; they are simply loci for switching perception, and may appear singly or in any combination.)

4.2. The human figure is not held together by fixed coordinates, that is, by an invariant relation between its parts. (To stand upright is matter of a posture taken, not anatomy.)
4.3. Artifacts, persons and the properties of things can occupy different places at the same time (places move).

(5) Sight evoking relationships

5.1. If what you see in an artifact (including persons as objects) is another person, and in seeing that other person you also see yourself in another form, a relationship is evoked (displayers and spectators) (donors and recipients) (maturity and immaturity) (roots and branches).

5.2. Artifacts carry (embody) relationships that persons also carry, such as between parent and child, old age and youth, man and woman, maternal and paternal kin.

(6) Transformative effects

6.1. As a summation of the above: Intending / effecting alterations in perception.

6.2. (Pro)creative outcome: One form (one person) may be produced out of another (form, person).