

THE FACE IN THE MOON

Peter Belton

INTRODUCTION

There are images which cause us to do a double take and look again because shapes and spaces in their construction suggest something 'other.' The ambiguities of representation arising – an 'in-betweenness' of meaning and metaphor – invite conversations between the artist and viewers. These can provoke questions about procedures and their effects, about motivations and contexts, and we might look further for explanation of these associations. This essay looks at the effects of visual ambiguities which take anthropomorphic and zoomorphic form and, in doing so, it takes a phenomenological position familiar to readers of Merleau-Ponty and Maldiney.

My project started with the discovery of a reproduction of a watercolour study by William Hodges for his *Maori Before a Waterfall, Dusky Sound* (1773) – a reproduction with faded colour values, yet enough tonal contrast to make a rather startling effect. In this study, Hodges had made a careful drawing of a Maori warrior standing on a rock, holding a curiously large double-ended taiaha. The subject was presented as a noble savage, seen in a classical contraposto pose. What was much more evident in this study, compared with the four oil painting studies that followed, is the curiously anthropomorphic treatment of rocks, cliff face and forest in the composition.



Figure 1. Peter Belton, analytical sketch showing anthropomorphic effects. From William Hodges, *Maori Before a Waterfall, Dusky Sound* (1773). Artist's 2010 Journal (1).

My first illustration is of my analytical sketch rendering from the Hodges study. There is suggestion of silhouettes in the shadow play in the photograph from which the sketch was generated. Not only did skiagraphic (shadow) theory of the origin of painting find credence amongst the artists and scholars of Hodges's world, but the shadow-tracing technique was being practiced on a vast scale to meet the demand for the new fad for silhouette portraiture. With this in mind, the reduction of information to representative silhouettes is an act of sympathetic interpretation, and the point from which the viewer may begin to make connections to a suggested 'other.' Indeed, when we are cognizant of the process of 'filling' images, we say that we see; we interpret and, in so doing, we construct understanding from the perspective of what we think we know.

If, then, the lens of our seeing is a construct, representations come to us through those filters of culture affected by time, the significance of place and events, and the production of beliefs, fears and desires. If representation is a conscious act which entails selection and the consequent privileging of some ways of seeing over others, then this process entails procedures about how we depict; it appears to be purposeful. From this position, we might ask the question as to how artists proceed. Are effects in imagery, which might be described variously as automatism or intuitions, really produced without decision? If the artist recognises happenstance associations of image with an idea, the decision may be made to leave such effects when they are seen to be an effective means to representation.

On the subject of skiagraphics, Alberti quoted the opinion of the Roman Quintilian that the earliest painters simply traced the outlines of shadows cast by the light of the sun. It seems to me that Michaelangelo's development of the foreshortened image and its distortion on flat and curved plane surfaces in the Sistine Chapel was suggested by his practice of using torchlight at close range – the result of his need to work on scaffolding. He would have seen how the proximity of torch- or candle-light to his own person would cast shadows on the wall which registered optical distortions which might, at various times, stretch, compress and bend his shadow shapes into expressive and suggestive silhouettes. It is easy to see how a suggestion of depth in a limb projected toward the viewer; for example, is achieved by enlarging a foot or hand as it comes 'forward' and reducing its relative size when it is depicted as being 'behind.' And, the effect of such decisions, premised on a discovery arising from shadow play is, in this instance, expressive; an enhanced sense of the drama of an action which reaches out to the viewer.

Michelangelo's contemporary, Leonardo Da Vinci, in his *Treatise on Painting*, exhorted students (and here I paraphrase) to look at walls splashed with a number of stains of various mixed colours. This is when you may find there some resemblances to a number of landscapes, adorned in various ways with mountains, rivers, trees, plains, valleys and hills. Moreover, you can see various battles, and figures in rapid action – and that these happenstance stains invite being read into and elaborated.¹



Figure 2. Peter Belton, *Dotard* (2010), zoomorphic sketch from a photograph of an ancient beech tree. From S Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana, 1996), 531. Artist's 2010 Journal (1).



Figure 3. Peter Belton, *Iron in the Forest* (2010), coloured drawing, mixed oil media on board, 100 x 120 cm.

AN EXPLANATION OF MY OWN PRACTICE

Iron in the Forest is one of five painted drawings produced for the “Seaward Bush” exhibition, shown in the Eastern Southland Art Gallery, Gore, in September 2011. This exhibition is premised on Paul Star’s doctoral thesis on the history of the loss of indigenous forest on the plains of Southland and represents the work of seven artists. My other titles signal a similar imaging: *Spectres*, *The Wind Remembers the Trees*, *Habitué*s and *Iron over the Forest*. My idea with *Iron in the Forest* is to suggest the incongruous and invasive presence of iron amongst the wood of the forest, signaling a culture/nature dichotomy. The ambiguity of its appearance and my ambivalence over the idea of an ironic reflection on and response to the subject is given shape through the representation of the iron objects as allusions to medieval armour (helmets) and, at the same time, recognisably common objects from the colonists’ daily existence: a ventilator cone, a coal bucket and a spherical weight on top of a squashed kettle.

One of the images for the wood came from a photograph in Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory*, and the other images are drawn from my own sketches, photographs and silhouette impressions of trees in the remnant of Seaward Bush, the Orokonui Forest near Dunedin and other sites. My other images in this exhibition include four carbonised planks presented in a row, each with the image of a spectral white beech tree trunk and each with a gaping dark maw in which the ghost of a kaumatua figure is just discernable. For this figure I used Rodin’s iconic

statue of Balzac, in various rotations, as my model. Another image is of the spiraling energy of wind and blown sand seen, in the absence of trees, to configure a tree-shape through a moment of remembering. In each of these compositions there is a hint of animistic reference and, perhaps, in the case of the illustrated example, an allusion to totemism inasmuch as inanimate things have been suggested as dynamic agents of change.

In *The Problem of Form in the Figurative Arts*, Adolf von Hildebrandt challenged the ideals of scientific naturalism as an explanation for the phenomenon of art by appeal to the psychology of perception.² It is from reading Hildebrandt, a sculptor who celebrated physical practice as much as he was a theoriser; that I can make a link to the phenomenological positioning of Merleau-Ponty and Maldiney. What does this mean for us and our search for a connection between the happenstance of *looking at* and the act of seeing?

The whole idea of imitation of nature, of idealisation or that of abstraction rests upon the assumption that what comes first are sense impressions that are subsequently elaborated, distorted and generalised. We have what psychologists call an ego which tests reality and shapes impulses from the id. And so we can remain in control while we half surrender to counterfeit coins, to symbols and substitutes. Our twin nature, poised between animality and rationality, finds expression in that twin world of symbolism with its willing suspension of disbelief. One example can suffice. It can be argued that we respond with particular readiness to certain configurations of biological significance for our animal survival. The recognition of the human face, on this argument, is not wholly learned. It is based on some kind of inborn disposition. Whenever anything remotely face-like enters our field of vision we are alerted and respond. We know the feeling when fever or fatigue has loosened the trigger of our reactions and a pattern on the wallpaper suddenly appears to look and leer at us ...³

The human face would seem to be the archetypal model for demonstrating schemata. The first comprehensible drawings by children are almost always schematic faces. No matter how basic, the wobbly circle with its two dots and a slash is instantly recognised as a signifier which tells us 'face.' The child's schema is not, however, the product of a deliberate process of abstraction, of a tendency to select and simplify. Rather, it signals an exploration through approximation, a loose association with an idea which translates into a sign for something remembered.

The illustration reproduced below is, however, an example of an artist working an idea from a schema into the particulars of a caricature. We might ask, is it the drawing of a pear which reminds us of King Louis Phillipe, or is it the image of King Louis Phillipe which reminds us of a pear? In New Zealand it is not uncommon to hear an impractical intellectual type described as an 'egghead.' In nineteenth-century France one pejorative term for an idiot was 'pear;' perhaps the closest English equivalent is 'fathead.' Through the illustration, the artist shows a progressive metamorphosis from royal physiognomy to fruit – as, indeed, today we also describe somebody who is silly as a 'fruit.' These images first appeared in the satirical paper *Le Charivari* in 1832 and earned the publisher, Charles Philipon, a spell in prison for libel.

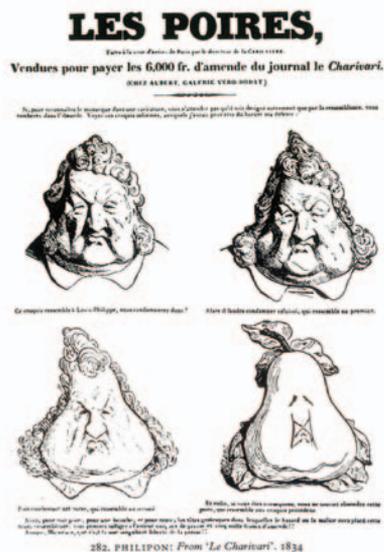


Figure 4. Honoré Daumier; *Les Poires* (1832), caricature of King Louis-Phillipe of France. Illustration, *Le Charivari*, ed. Charles Philipon. From EH Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon, 1960), 291.

DISCUSSION

In Ronald Bogue's study, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*, he says:

The 'face-landscape' forms part of a visual 'gridding' that Deleuze labels 'faciality.' ... The human face Deleuze sees as an important constituent of every social configuration of language practices and power relations, and [just] as composers deterritorialize refrains, so painters deterritorialize the facialized 'grids' whereby bodies and landscapes are structured by the gaze. In every society, discursive and nondiscursive power relations are organized according to a 'regime of signs,' within which the face functions as an active visual component. A general 'visibility,' or mode of organizing the visible, emerges from each regime of signs, extending from the face to bodies and finally to the world at large. ... The task of painters is to disrupt the patterns of faciality and disengage the forces that are regulated and controlled by the prevailing regime of signs. When painters succeed in this task, they capture and render visible the invisible metaphoric forces that play through faces, bodies, and landscapes, thereby inducing transverse becomings that allow the emergence of something new.⁴

To summarise key points made by Bogue on Deleuze. Elsewhere he says that the face is a 'component of a discursive practice,' meaning that it can be found, often when unlooked for, in the fields of tactile and visual encounter: It is essentially present in discourse about the experienced world, yet seems irreducible to language. 'The face' is a gestural, expressive, visual surface that accompanies verbal enunciations and interacts with them in ways that, in the search for order and identity, reinforce power relations. In our everyday speech, we invoke such terms as 'facet,' 'interface' and figures of speech such as 'on the face of things.' In addition, we can turn the relationship between signified and signifier in another direction when we see the face as a topographic domain with swellings/hills, eyes/pools and ponds, nostrils/lairs/caves, mouths/maws/caldrons, ears/cirques/quarries. "Recognition of a face is a component of discursive practice which leads us to widen this apprehension by noting the existence of similarly gestural, expressive visual appearances of the body that resonate with the facial surface and create an echo effect with [the] face's nondiscursive encodings."⁵

Insofar as the visual can be recognised as having any potential for reflecting rational order; its truth becomes subsumed in the process of textualisation, of being codified. Its truth is realised in the 'event' of its fall, or dissembling, a product of the accident of seeing; what Bogue calls a 'sliding into error.' Bogue claims that the 'event' opens up space and time in such a way that the order of past, present and future is disengaged. The space of the event is also disturbed by the organised dimensionality of (Merleau-Ponty's model of) the phenomenologically constructed 'lived body' and, in its stead, discloses a dimension of 'disorganised visibility,' what Lyotard calls 'figural space.' Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the 'lived body's' initial experience of space also suggests a realm below consciousness, but sees this space as the theatre for recognition and the organisation of the co-ordinates of sensory information.⁶

In his essay *The Theory of Rhythm and its Relation to Form* (1971), Henri Maldiney identifies a connection between sense experience and aesthetic outcomes which are phenomenologically premised.⁷ Here sense experience and movement are inseparable, as both are joined in the temporal moment of the 'event.' The outcome is more than just seeing; it becomes making visible the invisible, so that the image's essential function is not to imitate but to appear. Or, to paraphrase Paul Klee: the function of art is not to show the visible but to render visible. And, it follows through the unfolding of patterns which may present as analogies that we are brought to recognise a dynamic realisation of forms as signifiers.

Bogue tells us that the aesthetic has its origin in motivation from a moment of dislocation, in an unexpected moment when we are challenged by a world in which presumed temporal and spatial markers do not seem to cohere. This is what Cézanne called 'a moment of germination' in the 'irridescent chaos.'⁸ At this point it is appropriate to recognise Bogue's notion of the diagram as a visual synthesis of thought; a system of represented sensations and impressions, which works through the presentation of an analogy. We understand that this is not a reconstruction, but rather an approximation to 'that' – an appearance signifying 'that.' The instruments used to present visual analogies include

spatial co-ordinates, planes, bodies and colour. These in turn, depending on how depiction is fashioned, produce effects which can be seen as signifiers which, in turn, given temporal location in culture(s), can be construed as signs. To this end, we can on occasion recognise zoomorphic and anthropomorphic ambiguities as signifiers of and for cognitive repositioning.

In *What is Philosophy?* (1996) Deleuze and Guattari argue that becoming, or coming into being, is the act through which something or someone ceaselessly becomes 'other,' and that this alterity can be read as 'expression' and its signals understood when we unpack the process of its coming into being.⁹ It is well known that when a physically or emotionally exhausted body enters that liminal zone on the edge of sleep, the mind goes into a freefall. When we enter the liminal zone of impressions, we are freed from the constraints of logical associations and structured place. It is here we encounter phantasms and the invisible is rendered visible.

There is possibly some physiological explanation, too, which can be found in the symmetry of our own physical bodies which must necessarily function through reciprocation and balance. Extended through time, this need for symmetry manifests in the phenomenon of cycles. On a macrocosmic scale we recognise, with regard to all living phenomena, genesis, maturation, reproduction and death as states of being. Perhaps the human tendency to be drawn to find anthropomorphic and zoomorphic spectres, or to impose facialised pattern, is a product of these off-guard moments of apprehension? And is it also, as I suspect in the case of Hodges, an unconscious reversion to the security of a habit learned in the training of mind and hand?

On his return to London from New Zealand, William Hodges worked in his studio on at least three paintings of *Maori Before a Waterfall*. These were generated from his primary source material of studies of Maori and from landscape field notes. When it came to making the landscape settings for the several paintings of *Maori Before a Waterfall*, Hodges appears to have ad-libbed from these notes and slipped into an error of habit.

Indeed we might ask, were those slips of anthropomorphism, those discernible bits of body and face, a conditioned and unconscious response we might recognise in the return to the safe habit of 'correct drawing,' instilled from studying antique sculpture at the Royal Academy? We might ask to what extent does the event, in this case the conditioning of the artist through his training, load preconceived furniture into his perceptions. Any subsequent conception, development and representation of form and content will, in all probability, hold close the ghosts of perception and memory. And for us, the readers, the liminal furniture of dreams may reveal not just the *how* but also fashion the *what* of that which we think we see.

Peter Belton is a graduate of the University of Canterbury and holds an MFA from RMIT University, Melbourne. He has a background in teaching, teacher education and has curated exhibitions at the Southland Museum & Art Gallery. Peter is currently teaching at the Southern Institute of Technology. An exhibiting artist, Peter also works as a designer for Daniel Belton & Good Company, producers of contemporary dance performances and films.

- 1 EH Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon, 1960), 159.
- 2 Adolf von Hildebrandt, *The Problem of Form in the Figurative Arts* (1893), cited in Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 13.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 4 R Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 92-5.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 7 H Maldiney, *The Theory of Rhythm and Form* (Lyon, 1968). Cf. Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*, 113.
- 8 Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*, 135.
- 9 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Cf. Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*, 116-21.