Anthropology and aesthetics

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Editorial

The pre-Columbian

FRANCESCO PELLIZZI

Only a magic trick could bring back to life, today, old notions without which life is incomprehensible.
Antonin Artaud, “La falsa superioridad de las élites,”
El Nacional, Mexico, 25 July 1936

Archaeology deals with “ruins” and other remains, sometimes with monuments bearing words; in most instances with fragments that, despite their occasional inscriptions, are like silent questions calling for ever new answers. The analogy between archaeological search and detective work is a noted one; both are about lost or hidden motives, intentions, and deeds, only the archaeological riddle is never solved. Perhaps no crime, or indeed action, is ever fully explained either; as in criminology, quite different orders of questions can be raised leading to different interpretations of archaeological records when digging up material evidence of events that can neither be fully reenacted nor replicated.

Archaeology is also a sort of “time travel” going simultaneously in opposite directions: that of the “progressive” development of the discipline and that of the searching “regression” into its elusive domain. The latter is that space-of-memory—relentlessly increased, both in time-depth and geographic expansion—which we call “history” (a form of narration). But history, as Dominique de Menil recently said, “is made of unrealities,” what cannot be experienced cannot really be known. To imagine the “past,” our own or others’, scientifically or otherwise, is to string together a myriad such unrealities and to universalize history—which is a dominant trait of our way of thinking about the world.

While our society values the remains of long vanished peoples almost as much as those of its own, the kind of attention pre-Columbian and other archaic societies paid to their own past (and future) remains an open issue. It is probably no coincidence that the one American civilization that developed a formal system of writing that can (to some extent, at least) be “read” independently of lost narrative and iconographic context seems to have been most elaborately, and almost obsessively, involved in the computation of time, be it remembered, contextual, calendrical, and divinatory time—like other pre-Columbian cultures—but also, astral and, it would seem, “abstract” time (as for us). But we tend to speak too easily of both Maya “writing” and “time” in terms that reflect our own practices and conceptions. Writing in stone, or on funerary vessels, is not the same as what we call “writing.” Moreover, even the complex icons used in other representations, north and south, are quite often (as Gary Urton’s analysis of the Tello Obelisk aptly illustrates) more like fleshed-out “riddles” than conventional signs. In the case of hieroglyphic script, there is an “ontological” ambiguity beneath the dazzling veil of broken-up and recomposed images—half-transpiring through the interchange of words and things—in the tangle of human and trans-human manifestations and re-presentations. Thus, most pre-Columbian monumental images and sculpted language do not just tell “stories,” be they myths or records of glorious feats; they are paradoxical, metamorphic, and polymorphous, often esoteric forms that represent the embodiments of complex modes of experience. (Clemency Coggins’s essay in this issue attempts to define what some of their common contents might have been, cross-culturally, in ancient Mesoamerica.)

A supposed conception of the “circularity of time” is often invoked to account for the multiple “creations” and relative immobility of archaic and pre-Columbian cosmologies. But it becomes ever more evident that what we call, abstractly, “the past” appears there mainly as a particular form of memory—that of ancestry. There is, moreover, strikingly little evidence of a preoccupation with the future in our connotations of the word, that is, either as “progress” or as “apocalypse.” The future appears mostly as the place (rather than the time) where a reconnecting with the ancestral body will occur and this form of ancestry is what generates the “circular” movement of what might be called time-embodiments in the pre-Columbian cosmos.

I wish to thank my daughter, Aurora Ixchel, for lending me her word processor; G. Stromberg P., for commenting on one of the earlier versions of this editorial; and G. Althadeff, for several most helpful readings throughout its writing.
One might speak (superficially, at least) of non- or pre-eschatological systems for Ancient America—despite some well-documented depictions of ideal orders—since images of utopia appear to be absent before the advent of the Europeans. But native notions of chaos and space/time reversal (such as the story of the *Revolt of the Objects* reexamined by Jeffrey Quilter in this issue) were quite widespread from early times. They can be seen as aspects of representations of different modes of consciousness; for instance, among some Maya groups, as notions of “earthly” versus “soul,” or “dream” perception, or as visualizations of contrasting “forces” at play between humans, deities, animals, and other beings that constitute pre-Columbian “reality.” One could even read in them a trace of principle of destruction that tends to reappear—as in the *Popol Vuh*—to provide the ground, and “sacrificial secret,” of all creation (and is also central to Eastern and other traditions). Facing the intrinsic mystery of all Beginning—the inconceivable void or the equally aporetic chain of endless being and non-being that must “precede” it—there is the sense that in order for anything to come into existence in Ancient America, something must not just end but be terminated.

So the astonishing buried temple (“Hijole!”) uncovered by William and Barbara Fash and their associates at Copan seems to indicate, among other things, that the construction of new pyramids on the site of previous ones reflected more than increased prosperity of the community or the turnover of rulers; it signified some sort of total renewal, or new beginning of the cosmological/societal setup, and it required a casting away of the existing one. While awaiting further data and corroboration from other findings, some interesting implications may be gleaned. One is that Classic Maya time, without altogether losing its “cyclic,” becomes more believably uneven in its rhythms and sequences of embodiments and impersonations that encompass the whole society. A second implication, perhaps a more important one, is that this circular-noncircular flow appears to need periodic and spectacular (I use the word in both its literal and metaphorical sense) “jump-starts.” Maya civilization may have declined when the capacity (moral, ecological, and political) for producing such rebirths on a grand scale weakened and then collapsed.

There are traces of these renewals in the ethnographic record. The Chiapas Highland’s religious cargo system, for instance, of which the Zinacanteco San Sebastian festival (here reexamined by Bricker and Vogt) is an elaborate instance, though much observed, has not been interpreted in all the implications of its cyclical structure; there are aspects of it that may actually help explain why the Spanish system of *mayordomías* has been so readily adopted and spontaneously maintained by Maya communities (and many others in the Americas) for more than four hundred years. Despite the great emphasis on calendrical research in pre-Columbian studies, there has not been enough attention paid to the possible relations between the periodicity of the Indian cargo and what can be surmised of its possible antecedents.

Looking, even in a cursory way, beneath the surface of Maya Zinacanteco Catholicism, certain features of its four-tiered, main cargo system could be partially described as follows: there is a central temple (with two smaller adjunct ones) in which are housed the “gods” that are linked to calendrical moments, events, and names. To each one of these divinities (and “moments/events”) is attached one or more pairs of cargo holders—sort of “year-bearers,” because they have the charge, the burden (together with their wives), to carry the year’s ritual (that is, the year’s flow and movement from the “birth” moment of their own inauguration to the new birth and inauguration required when the sun will have returned to the same position. At least once (around Christmas time) a pantomime is enacted that stages a “killing” of lesser cargo holders by some of their seniors, and at change-over ceremonies a “dance of intoxication” is played out by some of them, also pointing to a critical condition (signified by the “change over”) in the state of consciousness, body and world (“osil—which has both a spatial and temporal connotation). It is as if, without renewal, time would stand still; but because renewal is itself “renewed,” so to speak, its ever new “starts” prevent the “center of the world” (*hteklum*) from falling into the grip of repetition (is that death, “ending?”). Or rather, repetition is necessary, and sought, for the sake of continuity and survival, but it is not a *repetition-of-the-same*. Because of the way in which these *im-personations* are staggered and the relentless change of impersonators (something that the unique and remarkably successful seventy-year-old Mexican system of “no re-election” curiously echoes), the cycle is not reborn just once a year, but as many times as there are cargos. (In this sense we could say that “a year” is made up of parts of as many god-years as there are cargos.) This is a temporal and cyclical model, one that stresses discontinuities, and in which the spacing of investitures, the overlapping of terms-of-office, and the geographical scattering and circulation of individuals (and families) appears as a
spiraling structure, but closed and "seamless," a sort of spatial and temporal horror vacui.\(^1\)

In the circuit of ritual visits that the cargo holders pay to each other's houses (and house shrines)—each cargo holder's house becomes a temple for a year, just as the official himself can be said to become an avatar—once again, an embodiment, if not quite an "incarnation"—of the deity itself by whose name he is actually called in ritual talk, their temporal function is combined with a spatial network that connects all of the year's "rebirth events" within the boundaries of the ceremonial center. Thus, time "becomes" space, and the year covers the whole community. But what remains most important, once again, in the perspective I have adopted here, is that in the cargo system, time is not homogeneous; it must be stopped and started, again and again, so that, paradoxically, what we would call a "year" never actually begins or ends.

The parallel official grouping and hierarchy of shamans, in Zinacantan, which convenes regularly three times a year with the principal purpose of establishing and maintaining good relations between the community and both the (unnamed) ancestral gods (toli me'il, or "fathers/mothers") and the equally unnamed "earth lords(s)" (yahva balamil), the spatial parameters are even more prominent—and are expressed through circuits of visits to both paramount and "minor" locally replicated shrines on mountains and around caves. However, in this instance, too, time is reintroduced by the scheduling of these communal rituals at "beginning," "middle," and "end of year." Perhaps more significant is that the fathers/mothers inhabiting the pilgrimage sites are not just in the past; one can say that they actually represent both "the past" (in traditional terms, the "origin," the arche) and "the present" (that is, the very existence of the community). Without them, nothing communal is—there is no identity. But time, in the shamanic register, is still essentially structured in spatial terms; ecstasy itself—which as "dream-perception" or "soul-vision" is the distinctive shamanic mode of knowledge—constitutes (particularly if compared to cargo in-vestmentiture and impersonation which pertains to the "waking" body) a de-personalizing movement seeking revelation through extra-body images that imply the conception of some sort of meta-space where alternate levels of perception/experience are given outside of "everyday" time. Of course, the ritualization of the extra-normal sets the communal shamanic ceremonies in an ambiguous "ontological" frame, not unlike the one within which the cargo "cycles" unfold.

As an ethnographer I would like to ask archaeologists—how can the presence or absence of a "shamanic dimension" be documented in archaeological records? We all know of the numberless pre-Columbian statuettes in ecstatic poses that crowd museum collections; if shamanism is a common heritage of all the Americas, is it not likely to have been prominent in Classic and Postclassic times? One could say, hypothetically, that by its more "private" and non-monumental nature, indeed by its very absorption with "nature" itself, that is, with the nonhuman, shamanism could better survive the demise of the complex Classic and precolonial sociopolitical systems than other aspects of religion and cosmological thought. It could also better escape the repression and suppression of colonial religious authorities, given the very elusiveness of its practices and the inconspicuousness of its shrines.

...the strange thing is that while not knowing where he comes from man should be able to use his ignorance, this kind of original ignorance, to know exactly where he must go.

Antonin Artaud, "Secretos eternos de la cultura."
El Nacional, 1 August 1936

Archaeology is a science of visual appearances; the objects of its concern are prevalently mute. Epigraphy—a venerable branch of Old World archaeology—is exactly what its name says: a "writing over" (something) which may not, as such, be an integral part of the underlying stone. Epigraphy is about writing to the age, and to the ages, as well as about labeling and about reading; it does not petrify the living word, but it purports to scratch—permanently—the surface of time.

Deciphering ancient Maya script was no egg of Columbus; it required an even greater sophistication than might have been required had the Rosetta Stone never been found. Beyond the obvious technical obstacles, there is a remoteness of thinking embedded in Amerindian canonical representations far removed

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1. Some of these notes on the Zinacantan religious cargo system, based on my own observations, were first sketched in my role as "commentator" at a Round Table on "Pre-Columbian States of Being," organized by Jeffrey Quilter at Dumbarton Oaks in April 1996, relating in particular to a paper by Elisabeth Newsome dealing in part with Yucatecan katun "renewals" through the erection of stela around the time of the Conquest. The same is the case for my observations on Zinacantan "souls," below, in relation to John Monaghan's paper on "spirit companions" at the same conference. A good portion of the proceedings of that meeting are scheduled to appear in RES 33 Spring 1998.
from the relative familiarity of our ancient Near Eastern roots. Among the many reasons for this is the obviously different layering of cultural continuities and discontinuities in Euro-Asiatic and Euro-American history. What made Champollion's discovery possible in the first place was the residue of a Mediterranean civilization in which translation and the perpetuation of written records connected elite and merchant strata of different cultures over three continents and a stretch of millennia. In that world, multilingualism was, and still is, the rule rather than the exception, and not only among the literate.

With important differences due in part to its relative isolation, multilingualism may also have been widespread in the Americas at the inception of the first urban civilizations. Certainly, some commonality of esoteric and "technical" knowledge, speculation, and "belief," is implicit in Clement Coggin's hypothesis of the possible existence of itinerant specialists adept at elaborate, and cryptic, visual representations. Her interpretations of intricate temple and other types of ornamentation would suggest that different and sophisticated levels of "iconographic translingualism" (not excluding the languages of astronomy and mathematics) existed throughout large areas of the New Continent. Much later, individual members of the native elites were absorbed into the society of European conquerors, but that incorporation was sporadic and for the most part required a radical suppression of the memory of an autochthonous past (though there were exceptions, as shown by Serge Cuzin's luminous colonial studies: see, in particular, his recent L'Aigle et la Sybille [Paris, 1994]). Or rather, an ideological mechanism was set in place by which the "glorious" autochthonous past (Aztec, Maya, Incain, etc.) could and would be ever more proudly invoked as its true memory faded from the "official memory" of the Colony and post-Enlightenment nation-states that followed.

The fact that the most elaborate form of writing developed in the pre-Columbian era—that of the Classic Maya—had probably already fallen into at least partial oblivion, in many areas, before the landing of the Europeans constitutes in itself a problem for archaeology. But even if it hadn't—if, as is probable, certain groups of "specialists," particularly in Yucatan and perhaps also in Oaxaca and the Central Valley, still retained the ability to interpret the more than thousand-year-old scripts—what is striking, as has often been noted, is the swiftness with which a handful of newcomers were able to obliterate the old record while promptly superimposing a new one; the dictionaries of Motolinia, Motul, etc., all the way to Laughlin's Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantan, have registered in European script forms of speech—and thought—that are quite alien to those that originated, and were partly shaped by, the development of hieroglyphs. I am not advocating Whorfian determinism, but speaking of forms that in this as in other domains, refer to essences, ways of being. By Europeans or under European direction, lofty, even esoteric, traditional knowledge and wisdom was recorded in the essentially exoteric, "utilitarian" means of our phonetic script. But when archaic traditional contents had been encoded, more or less cryptically, in the "hieroglyphs" and composite icons of ancient American monuments, this sort of "writing" partook of a different "ontological" standing. To put it simply, the "writing" was not about things, it was the Thing.

What is then the nature of this "thing" and its archaeological traces? As already mentioned, to focus on "writing," or pictography as only "signs," "messages," or "communications" can actually push us further away from an understanding of the enigmatic remains of those civilizations than our older, necessarily muted, approach. When a whole temple, as the one at Copan, is found to have been not just used as ground and support for a bigger one, but completely encased, intact, and plastered within its core, the encasing "pyramid" becomes a sort of tomb-temple of the secreted inner monument (or inner-memory)—the commemoration of a commemoration, as it were. Perhaps more important still, this architectural thesaurization points to the unified nature of the object-temple, to its undecomposable uniqueness. The object is an event to be remembered or forgotten as a whole; it has, in this sense, the completeness of ritual (versus, for instance, the intrinsic incompleteness of myth). David Stuart's contribution (in this issue) regards the Maya stela, literally, as a piece of writing, an object that is in itself, simultaneously, an event and its record—monumentum—just as the single glyph must also be viewed, in this perspective, as not only a "word" or cluster of words, or, even less, an "image," but a thing-event.

One can only obliquely address "thingness" in ancient Maya terms, if at all. For instance, and reversing what was just said, if the temple-pyramid had to be encased and buried as a whole, then it is reasonable to infer that the notion of such a thing-pyramid was already given "before" it actually became an object
buried-as-a-whole. The same can be said for David Stuart's stela-as-ritual. I mean that “thingness” cannot be (materialistically) assumed simply because an object appears to subsist (as ruin, remains, or buried treasure)—which would be a weak determination of its thingness—but must in each case be defined by what one would call, in French, its contexte événementiel, that is, those conditions of its making and use that are distinct in space and time. There is no true “thing” that is not marked by a conceptual discontinuity—one dimension of which is a sort of “freezing” of time; in this sense, all objects are cold things.

A non-Aristotelian thought founded on the synthetic representation of contradictions is obviously at the antipodes of what we call scientific reasoning—the analytical discourse we consider to be eminently rational that presides over most of our systematic investigations of the world, past and present. So there is obviously a fundamental difficulty when this rational thought is called upon to account for the material remains of not-necessarily-rational thinking—or of ways of “reasoning” that are not necessarily rational in the same sense as ours (there are, after all, different forms of “logic” even within mathematics); a bias is inevitable in this very act of “scientific” interpretation-appropriation. Yet to label pre-Columbian thought “irrational” would also be fundamentally improper, if for ratio we must intend any consistent and comprehensive account of the orders of reality. The question then becomes, which reality? One cannot simply speak of metaphysical reality, because this presupposes a distinct conception of the “physical,” for which there is no evidence, in my understanding, before the “original” lineage of thought inaugurated by the pre-Socratics.2 Outside of that tradition (and perhaps of certain literate Eastern ones), the reality in question appears, more often than not, in the form of bundles of notions. Actually, the very concept of “bundle” has a special significance for symbolic thought, since one could say that every symbol (for instance, the Maya glyph) is a bundle (or “knot”) of signs. To be more specific, a symbol is a bundle because it conjoins heterogeneous things into a new “unbreakable” unit. If one wished to explore the reasons for this, the question could be phrased as follows: why do certain (“archaic”) forms of thought need to operate through the staging (that one might, in this respect, call “proto-dramatic”) of opposing or contradictory entities, while others rely on an ordering of things according to sequences and paradigms of even more homogenous and hierarchically structured categories? What are the relations, and shifts, between analogical and scientific thought? Sensory as well as categorical analogies, the imaginative transposition (translation) of insights from one domain to another, still play a capital role in scientific imagination and discovery, but the aim in science, in the end, remains that of reducing any discrepancy between fact and theory, or any aporias or conundrums, into linear sets of causal principles and classifications. If things have diverged somewhat from this positivist ideal since the discovery of quantum mechanics, Heisenberg’s indeterminacy principle, Gauss’s theorem, etc., it still holds, as a distinguished Cambridge physicist once put it to me, that nothing even in these and other modern developments invalidates the basic principles of physical, and ultimately univocal, causality. Even the theory of probability and its statistical applications have simply projected the chain of causal links from a “mechanical” to a macroscopic, or infinitesimal, mathematical dimension; statistical causes and the predictions that they entail are still prescriptive—and hence future-oriented, although, as has been noted, they are unsuited to deal with the particular—with what, borrowing loosely from the terminology of some of today’s cosmologists (though they probably would not approve) one might call space-time “singularities.”

In the pre-Columbian world, as generally in archaic societies and, to a still considerable extent, in the

2. Dans original, il convient d’entendre avant tout origine. et origine signifie l’élément d’initiative radicale relativement a quoi <nos> problèmes ne sont peut-être, dit à peut près Heidegger, que l’éclair blafard et silencieux par lequel le signorel encore un orage depuis longtemps retiré, en sorte que nous ne sommes peut-être nous même, Occidentaux d’aujourd’hui, que les tard-venus du radieux Declin qu’inaugurèrent les Présocratiques.

Jean Beaufret, Parmenide—Le Poème (1996 [1953]), p. 17

It is prudent to avoid any reference to “metaphysics,” per se, when dealing with pre-Columbian cultures, despite the fact that there is, of course, a complex “native phenomenology” which has survived even in contemporary Amerindian societies. But phenomenology is not metaphysics; it is even anti-metaphysical.

3. The statistical method shows the facts in the light of the ideal average but does not give us a picture of their empirical reality. . . . The distinctive thing about real facts . . . is their individuality. Not to put too fine a point on it, one could say that the real picture consists of nothing but exceptions to the rule, and that, in consequence, absolute reality has the character of irregularity.

postcolonial indigenous civilizations of the Americas, causality is not weaker but overdetermined; nothing is ever left to chance. It is a polyvalent conceptual mode that not only encompasses quite different and (for us) incompatible realms, but is also endowed with a quality that Western causality is mostly devoid of—reversibility. Moreover, rather than prediction (a function largely entrusted to divination), archaic causality tends to be explanatory and interpretive, which means that it prevailently works a posteriori. One essential difference, I think, lies in the fact that Amerindian thought does not tend to isolate cause-effect instances, or "moments," from the texture of a broader framework of influences and correspondences. Or rather, while the single event, in its uniqueness, may remain undetermined as to its causes (something still noticeable perhaps even in the so-called "fatalism" of the prevalent mestizo culture), its significance is predicated on (for us) qualitatively and logically disparate conditions of things and beings, rather than (as for us) on a hierarchically structured set of inclusions and exclusions. In what can be called, generically, a "metamorphic" system of thought (once more, not only American), a basic life-world flow and unity is assumed that prevents any analytical dissection of its components into mutually exclusive entities—including those categories by which we tend to sharply separate the before from the after. Far from being a form of logical impotence, this orientation of thought reflects and expresses the phenomenally powerful hold of archaic logos on all aspects—visible and invisible, past and present—of the cosmos as a whole. What was missing perhaps, once again, from the original form of this mode of thinking, was what is often called "a vision of the future," or, more religiously, messianic hope.

Many anthropologists have now distanced themselves from the Structuralist view of archaic man as opposite to a "nature" that is perhaps nowhere conceptualized as such in the nonwestern world. In the ebb and flow of theoretical fashions concerning definitions of the human and the nonhuman, the savage/primitive and the civilized, Structuralist dualism was a late comer among theories attempting to connect the Enlightenment's opposition of good, or "innocent," nature-bound men and societies, to bad, artificial, and technology-bound ones (in this it is also, for all its scientific claims, paradoxically related to the strong anti-technological and anti-scientific currents that have characterized this century). While originating in Rousseau (and overlooking Vico, like much modern social theory), Structuralism sought to reaffirm a sort of universality of human categorical thinking (la pensée sauvage) not out of tune with contemporary "humanitarian" concerns. The "good savages," au fond (it is of course a ratiocinating "fond"), are just like us; that's why they are so "good" and why (rather inconsequently) we should try to go back to being more like them.

A corollary to dualism, in most of its forms, is mediation; something must provide a link, a connection (of whatever sort) between opposite terms. Now, such a view of dualism and mediation, particularly for pre-Columbian civilizations, is sometimes replaced by its opposite—some form or other of "monism"—to account for the interconnectedness of all things that seems prevalent in archaic thought. But the complex articulations of distinctions, classifications, and oppositions that Lévi-Strauss so convincingly brought to light in his studies of totemism, mythology, kinship, and other taxonomic systems cannot be dismissed as modern man's logical projections on a fundamentally nonanalytic, radically different mental reality. Archaic man thinks, of course, and in so doing performs mental operations whose logic is not alien to ours. Certainly, Mesoamerican astronomical computations and calendrical systems required a highly developed rationality of the kind that we associate with the traditions of reasoning of "high" literate civilizations, particularly with those that generated our scientific and technological culture. This does not mean, however, that what those mostly implicit and non-self-reflexive forms of thought and doing are about is the same as ours. Both scientific and archaic thought seek the ultimate descriptive fabulation of totality, but in so doing, the first goes toward a definition of infinitesimal causes while the second, at least in its prevalent Native American forms, compounds vast elemental forces into a panorama of creative cosmological battles in which the affective components are not divorced from the intellective ones.

Perhaps both monism and dualism are inadequate to account for a form of thought whose complexity, if not as pragmatically efficient as that developed in Europe, is certainly no less adequate to deal with the "mysteries" (the word is still appropriate) of reality than that of those modern theorists, for instance, who now try to account for the "self-structuring of order" and the attraction-of-opposites/repulsion-of-similars in the interactions of infinitesimal particles and macroscopic celestial bodies. In pre-Columbian America, these elements of knowledge are prevalently expressed by the existential polarities of "states of being" that reflect conditions that are at once objective and subjective, logical and
affective. Among these are those of heat and coolness (water and fire), that of generator and generated (mother and offspring), that of time and death (duration and ending), which perhaps encompasses all of them, as does the original one (again in Heidegger’s sense) of “one” (singleness) and “two” (duality or multiplicity). A myriad different relations are shaped by these parameters, making up that particular texture-of-being, in all its variations, that is still half-perceivable in the remains of the pre-Columbian world.

Long ago, Laurette Sejourné (in Pensamiento y Religión en el México Antiguo [ México, 1957]) wrote of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican thought as “striving to abolish opposites,” giving as an example the Teotihuacan “Tloc” complex and discussing in particular both the alt-laachinolli, “burnt water,” symbol of the “flowery war” and that of the “mystical” and initiatic representation for blood. It was, I feel, a fruitful approach in its time. However, to speak of “opposites” may not be the most appropriate categorization either, at least not in the common sense of the term. The sixteenth-century formulations of Nicholas of Cusa may be closer to the mark, with their opposites that come to coincide, that is, literally, to “fall (back) together.” More precisely perhaps, in the Americas one could speak of opposites that are actually born of each other in the dynamic sense that each, on some crucial plane of its existence, is an operating force in transformations/manifestations of the other. Here again some deep-seated correspondences may exist with Far Eastern traditions; the “image” of the forty-ninth ideogram of the Chinese Book of Changes (I Ching), which is called “Revolution (Molting),” reads (in R. Wilhelm’s and C. F. Baynes’s translation):

Fire in the lake: the image of REVOLUTION
Thus the superior man
Sets the calendar in order
And makes the seasons clear.

The possible connection between the “revolutions” of the sun (which is fire) with the coming and going of life-giving water is of course of central importance in the pre-Columbian world. It is interesting that “molting,” which is associated with a change that preserves identity—as in the shedding of the snake’s skin (the snake-dragon, the flying “Feathered Serpent,”) is also crucial to both the ancient Americans and the Chinese—is here associated with a “clarifying” of the seasons. The seasons are what is given, “nature”— and an “ordering” of the calendar—is what doubles the seasons in (“ritual”) human time. That is to say, the seasons must be correctly perceived while the calendar must be properly regulated.

Of great importance to Amerindian cultures is the plane of perception often referred to as “dream state.” This is prevalently a shamanic function, falling within the range of ecstatic modes of experience (to which I have already referred), but is generally considered to be, in various degrees, accessible to all. My own Tzotzil Maya interlocutors alternatively call this the “soul state” (ta vaycil, ta hc’uleltik, respectively), thus revealing that what we refer to as “dream” (or the “unconscious,” before and after Freud) is not quite the same as what is meant by vaycil (or, alternatively, vayihel, which can denote either the animal-soul of the witch or the animal into which he/she is capable of transforming himself/herself); the archaic soul, like its “dream,” is double. This is too vast a topic to touch upon lightly, but suffice it to say here that next to the spirit (c’ulel—what may be conceived as “sacred,” or separate, in all beings) that perceives “on the surface of the earth” (ta sba balamil) is the one that both “dreams” and “is dreamt,” as it were, in the “soul-world” (ta hc’uleltik), and this world is the totemic (and metamorphic) one in which identity is invested in the physical disfraz of the “animal-soul” (canul, or, in the Mexican Indian koine, of course, nagual), just as certain “divinities,” deemed to be animals, are often represented in human disguise. This is the generative realm; that is, the transformative one where beings are born of each other (not necessarily of their own kind) but can also fall prey to each other.4 As such, it is the realm before and beyond all order, and all (social) identity, which also constitutes the “other side” of ritual and whose knowledge (and hence relative “control”) is one of the aims of initiation. But what may also be at play here, as perhaps in many other instances throughout the Americas, is a conception of the “person” as partaking of multifarious qualities that are distributed unevenly and discontinuously throughout the cosmos; while waking awareness is limited within the confines of the subject’s body, his dream or soul awareness can—with greater or lesser control over them—take on the qualities of other bodies. So the night world, the world of darkness and sleep, may become the site of vision, while the daylight of the waking state (‘osil) may be blinding.

4. Remo Giudieri has also noted recently, in a seminar dealing with Aboriginal Australian cosmological thought, how the plane of “dream,” there too, corresponds to the “metamorphic” one of principal or causal “time.”
If Parmenides’ fundamental contraposition of light and dark—so important in later Western thought and also in the New World—introduces a negativity that actually undermines duality (the terms being truly asymmetrical and hence finally to be resolved into oneness), pre-Columbian thought, particularly in some of its elaborate Mesoamerican forms, preserves duality by making it the engine of transformation.

The generative contradictions of this way of thinking can also be appreciated in its translation and application of formative (and, again, transformative) paradigms to what we (after the Greeks) call “physical” reality. For instance, to return to the all-important fire—water symbolic knot (cf. the alchemists’ *aqua vitae*, *eau-de-vie*, etc.), fire both above and below groundwater makes the latter evaporate and ascend into smoke and vaporous clouds that then return as life-giving “celestial water” once heat subsides. Celestial water often comes in conjunction with lightning, in native thought both a chthonian and celestial fire, that can then turn into fertilizing ground fire, etc. Without water and fire there can be no corn growing, no food production at all. Fire and water also have essential lustral functions, separately and in conjunction—in this, too, they are complementary and transformative. They are both intrinsically unstable elements, displacing themselves in various ways, both vertically and horizontally. Water is life, but frozen water can harbor no life. Fire is destruction, but without fire, again, there is no life. In classic Mesoamerican thought, fire and water, *intertransferring*, are key elements of that mode of existence (its hieroglyph is that of “movement”), of which we are still part, that is called the “Fifth Sun” (or “Fifth Creation”).

In the body/soul register of animated life, life of autonomous movement, life of relative freedom and intention, it seems appropriate that blood would come to represent a sort of “liquid fire” or “fiery water.” Blood is an intrinsically symbolic compound, conjointing heterogeneous (though complementary) elements. As such, blood is not just an *offering* (and the sacrificial element par excellence), but also, again, the focus of transformative, that is, *initiatory*, operations. As such, blood is not only, and principally, the vehicle of a power to be contained and preserved, but something to be kept flowing. And in fact, for many pre-Columbian civilizations blood is one of the essential elements not just of the body, but of the “person,” the others being bones and flesh. Blood is what moves within the body but also the body as *movement* or body-of-life. Bones are what is hard and fixed *within*, what is *lasting*, and also, the body-of-death (*calavera*). In the middle, flesh is the earthly element, what eats and is eaten, the fuel, and *aboño*, of life. In the spiritual realm, the realm of “souls,” blood is life itself as spirit, flesh is life as nourishment, and bone is life as memory (bone is *past* life, hence also life-that-endures). So death, in changing bodies into skeletons, transforms ephemeral life into *life everlasting*: there may be no Resurrection in pre-Columbian America, but there is *preservation* (of life), and nothing is ever *lost* in the great (yes, “cyclical”) order of the world. In this lies the great symbolic paradox of “solar” religions that nourish with endless sacrifice an ever returning, at once life-giving and life-taking, Sun. It is impossible to understand anything “deep” about ancient Amerindian civilizations without grasping the crucially *vivifying* role Death plays in many of them.

There are two principal words in Tzotzil Maya for body: *takopal*, whose root appears to indicate something like the “dry essence” of a living entity, its *boniness* (bone, in turn, is associated, in prayer, with stone), and *okol*, which appears to have both a connotation of verticality, like a shaft, the stem of the cross, etc.—in this, not unlike the Greek root of *stela*—but also one of flow, as for instance the horizontal current of a river. I cannot make too much of this at present, except to note that, apart from these spatial connotations of “uprightness” and “extension,” the “body” in itself, as a unitary and indivisible material

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5. Antonin Artaud was perhaps the first “outsider” to grasp intuitively this basic dimension of the pre-Columbian spirit, and its implications for postcolonial Mesoamerican Indian (and mestizo) cultures:

In a word—and herein lies the true secret—the sun is a principle of death not a principle of life. The very bottom of the ancient solar culture is to have shown the supremacy of death... But destruction is transformative. Life maintains its continuity by the transformation of the semblances of being... To realize the supremacy of death... is to put present life in its right place; to make it ride on different levels at once; experience the stability of levels that make the living world a great force in a state of equilibrium; it is, finally, to reestablish a great harmony.

A. Artaud, “La cultura eterna de México.”
El Nacional, 13 July 1936

Once more, there may have been an esoteric and initiatory dimension to these conceptions of the sun-as-fire, particularly in reference to the solar embodiment of Time. It may be partly expressed in these suggestive formulations by Jorge Luis Borges:

Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that drags me on, but I am the river; it is a tiger that tears me apart, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that devours me, but I am the fire (quoted in Gennaro Sasso, *Tempo, Evento, Divenire* [Bologna, 1996]).
entity into which an individual identity is invested (abstracting from its particular attributes), seems a notably absent notion. But in any event, since many of the objects of representation are also "bodies" of sorts, one could ask what may be their relation to the bodies of living and departed Amerindians. One could start to approach the question by noting that stones are like the "doubles" of bones and, as such, the obvious things-of-memory, what is left behind, remains. They are the memory that casts backward and forward in life, perpetuating itself in a mineral state. They are the skull-and-bones of "true" life, life that takes itself as invested of significance not just beyond but through death. The stela, the pyramid, are like hard bodies of mnemonic presence, or re-presented bodies of permanence.

If stelae and pyramids could be sorts of doubles of the bones of the living (see Maarten van de Guchte's article in this issue on the "brother statue" of the Inca king) and also stand as embodiments of the ancestor gods themselves to whom prayers and sacrifices were offered, then the other/afterlife to which they pertained may not have been so much "in the future," or "elsewhere," as an immanent/transcendent state (the concept is difficult for us even to formulate) that guaranteed and justified this life condition; the impermanent gained status from the permanent whose very existence, however, without the impermanent's devotional gesture, would remain as "virtual" as that of mountains that nobody ever saw. This is the "idolatry" of which the Christian evangelizers of the New World spoke, tendentiously but not altogether incorrectly. "Nature," in this traditional view of things, though unnamed, would have consisted of a form of experience that—symbolically (in the strong sense of the word adopted here)—was seen as at once dependent on and independent of the play of the artificial, that is, of the human essence and its awareness, seen as precariously perched, like Humpty Dumpty, between the impermanence of action and the relative durability of objectified "purpose." Actually, it is the memory of action that one could call the "naturalization" of intention, and prayer (as Mauss saw long ago) may well have been—as it is in many Amerindian groups today—the privileged channel to convert back the "natural," unreliable world of unselfconscious action and fleeting accident into the bony features of the human landscape: pyramids, stelae, temples, but also now churches, town halls, clinics, and schools. Isn't it significant that so little everyday pre-Columbian housing has survived? It cannot just be a practical question. Permanence required a concerted investment by the community for the transformation of shelter into eminent dwelling, for the objectification of its intention-to-be-permanent by the erection of monuments (the forgotten dead lie in unmarked graves), things-to-be-remembered, until elaborate forms of representation, and even "writing," took hold—things-that-remember, objects that, in and of themselves, commemorate.

It is this memory—a memory transmitted in fragments to us and to the descendants of those foregone and impermanent makers-of-permanence—that archaeology is called on to tap. The paradox is that in so doing, archaeology, by its very name a discourse, or ratio, of "beginnings" (archai), then becomes the science of endings, interpreting the remains of a lost memory that no longer directs its object-making toward the materializing and preserving of its own principia, but that nourishes the relatively new ideology of a forgotten "historical past."

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Then there is Mexico, with its subtle political structure which, basically, hasn't changed since the time of Moctezuma.

Antonin Artaud, "Lo que vine a hacer a México,” El Nacional, Mexico, 5 July 1936

Revisiting Mexico City’s glorious Museo de Antropologia on the days of Comandante Ramona’s triumphant arrival in the nation’s capital and address to the Congreso Nacional Indigena being held there, one could not help being struck by the enormity of the event; as when Gandhi, half-naked, stepped down from his train at Victoria Station to Winston Churchill’s opprobrium and the admiration of the world, the image—instantly, widely, and prominently transmitted—of the diminutive, traditionally clad figure of a masked Indian woman, frail, undernourished and gravely ill, escorted and surrounded by "civil rights" mediators who next to her looked like white giants, for once had all the makings of one of those events the media are prone to refer to as an "historical" event. Despite the "indigenist" setting—the whole thing was more startling and "incongruous" than if a Roman woman (perhaps still harboring some vestige of "pagan belief") had suddenly appeared at Charlemagne’s court, before the year 800, to remind him of what legitimized his own imperium. The tiny, "sacrificial" apparition, like a Tonantzin come back to "life," fired up the collective imagination of the land, and little "idols" in her image are already alighting on many a private altar. A "miracle" has indeed happened, and "time" has been renewed.
Under its Catholic veneer, the Zinacanteco k'in t'l "masquerade" I evoked earlier is also a reflection of pre-Columbian conceptions of "time renewal," and hence expresses, together with many other forms of a system outwardly "adapted" to a colonial and postcolonial condition, an effective resistance to the "foreign" eschatological message brought by Europeans incorporated into the ritual as impersonations played out by out-going (that is, past, "ancestral," tol'i me'lli) cargo holders; the "Conquerors" themselves are appropriated, in-corporated (literally) into the bodies of the "actors" and neutralized within the coils of the ritual cycle. The Colony could not be beaten, of course, but it was, at least culturally, kept at bay (with the double complicity of self-serving and humanitarian colonial interests). What is generally referred to as "syncretism," as Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán saw long ago, actually was, and is, a symptom of that resistance.

It is not surprising then (in this and other respects), that Zinacantán and even central Chamula (where similar rituals are still rigorously held—so much so that those who do not wish to participate in them, such as the "Protestants" and "Catequistas," are expelled from the community) have largely remained aloof from the progressive movement behind the revolt of the exogenously named "Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional." Religious ritual "resistance," with its subterranean (subconscious?) and cryptic reaffirmation of a threatened identity—something like the "abstract" motifs of traditional weaving that are there for everybody to see and (almost) nobody to understand—as well as other aspects of Indian "political," "economic," and "ideological" life, are long repressed but nonetheless strong and venerable social forms still tending to their own preservation in the face of the vagaries of change.

In fact, the unprecedented occupation of San Cristóbal Las Casas by the "Zapatistas" on New Year's Eve, 1994, can be said to have marked, symbolically, the end of colonial and postcolonial arrangements for Highland Chiapas and perhaps also for other indigenous areas of Mexico (just as the insurgents claimed). The Western messianic message, the idea of the "future," has finally been adopted by large and more or less "anomic" sectors of the "generically Indian" population, and the days are counted for conservatives. At the same time, forces that were always, at best, unsympathetic, at worst, vituperously hostile, to native religious practices and languages (considering them backward obstacles to "consciousness raising," "proletarianization," and the ever desirable "class struggle"), such as the Churches (especially of the Protestant, post-Vatican II, and "Teología de la Liberación" variety) and the various Marxist and Positivist—revolutionary or evolutionary—progressives that have held ideological sway over the past two centuries, are now suddenly and with equal enthusiasm embracing the cause of "indigenous culture" and even "autonomy." Christianity and its secularizing sequels have in the end won over "Paganism" (it took almost five centuries!), and a dying, Westernized, and sanitized "Indian identity," with frills of exotic "culture" and folklore, diluted and politicized by the ideology of pan-national (and even international) "social" movements (sounding like incipient pan-Indian "labor unions")—and even, now, by newer fads of anti-technological and ecological "dissidence" (it is easy to dissent against the overwhelming, when there is no risk of winning)—can now finally and safely be upheld. The industrialization (and "post-industrialization") of the subcontinent, today, does after all need plenty of reasonably "educated" and (by all means!) inexpensive manpower. And the Internet (Marcos docet) needs ever new and more colorful inhabitants.

Antonín Artaud, visiting Mexico in the progressive and promising years of President Cardenas, while respecting the originality of the Mexican modern experiment, had no illusions about Mexican indigenismo, despite seeing it as still rooted in pre-Columbian models. But he considered that something could be rescued of the old Indian spirit, under new guises:

As I see it, nothing that would resemble a poetic and sterile nostalgia for a dead past, but the longing for a lost science, for a deep attitude of the human spirit that I consider it vitally important that we find again.

"La cultura eterna de México," El Nacional, Mexico, 13 July 1936

In another article, Artaud evoked the possibility of the rise, among Indians, of a sort of "scientific," rather than "religious," "pantheism" that would bring the "old notion of the sacred" back to life—not as a "philosophical system," but as the means for a "dynamic investigation of the universe." The question

6. One has spoken of a Mexican "Indianism," of an Indianist policy of the present Mexican government, one has spoken of a reawakening of the Indian spirit... Now, these are patently false rumors. In truth, there isn't such an awakening of the Indian spirit in Mexico, and the revolution, on Mexican soil, is not what one imagines... .

A. Artaud, "Las fuerzas ocultas de México," El Nacional, 9 August 1936
remains whether this alternative “scientific” way may still be viable, or if the grip of the secularizing forces (both within and without the Churches) is by now too strong and too pervasive for such a “resurgence.” But what remains most important, I suppose (“history” is a witness and it must be trusted), is that while Comandante Ramona—already an “ancestor” behind her mask—may be dying, the Maya live!

Hieroglyph of atl-tlachinoll, or “burnt-water,” denoting the “flowery war” (from Codex Borgia, according to Laurette Sejourné). Noting that the Aztec Quetzalcoatl carried this glyph as pectoral and that a Teotihuacan fresco already represented him as “Lord of Dawn” (Tlalocuizcapantecuhtli) “warring” with both fire and water, Sejourné concluded that the deeper meaning of the “flowery war” was inner struggle and “liberation of the divine element through the burning of matter.” Such an interpretation may be too influenced by Western and Oriental mystical notions, but it is probably closer to authentic pre-Columbian conceptions than many a positivistic modern one. Redrawn by G. Alhadef.

7. As this editorial was about to go to press, I received Gary Gossen’s interesting article on the EZLN’s insurrection (“Maya Zapatistas Move to the Ancient Future,” American Anthropologist 98 [1996]:528–538). It is an imaginative interpretation of the events of the last three years, in the light of Maya “cosmovision” and history, connecting aspects of the outward discourse of the “Zapatistas” with persistent traits of the Maya “way.” Its perspective is somewhat different from the one proposed here, but it coincides in identifying strategies of resistance rooted in forms of traditional thought.

Gossen was already known to have remarked how Maya insurrections, in the Colony and thereafter, have tended to occur at times of crisis, or weakening, of Spanish (and mestizo) central power. That is where resistance, given the appropriate conditions (including “leadership”), becomes affirmation. He also calls attention to the provenance of the leaders of these revolts—almost invariably “embodiments” (in the terminology I have adopted here) of exogenous power, thus vested with “messianic” charisma. Often, these figures are “used” by the Indians to pursue their visions of renewal. Such a characteristic of messianic actions is of course not specific to the Maya (after all, Fidel Castro came from Galicia and Ernesto “Che” Guevara from Argentina; as the old saying goes, nemo propheta in patria). How else would one change functional (or even dysfunctional) systems if not by incorporating—at least for a time—external elements, something new? My contention, somewhat corroborated by the non-revolt of almost all the strongly integrated and most “traditional” of the Maya communities of the Chiapas Highlands (something Gossen is well aware of but does not comment on in this article), is that not all “messianisms” are alike (being all shaped by what they rise against), and that this particular messianism, explicitly attacking the “Tratado de Libre Comercio” with the United States and Canada (NAFTA), partakes of a form of ratio that is eminently Western, modern, future-oriented, and even “internationalist.”

I suppose that it is important to evoke in this context, as Gossen does, the myth of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, whose “messianic” features are said to have played such a crucial role in the very demise of the Mexica empire; but a characteristic of premodern, archaic, and “transitional” messianisms is that they are all oriented towards a “restoration,” a return of (and to) the past. This is not the case in those directly or indirectly shaped by the heritage of the Christian Revelation and all its religious, antireligious, and nonreligious offshoots.
movement, said in 1964). But Duchamp had already stated, in 1917, that it was not so much necessary for an object to be "new," as to create "a new thought for that object"—a thought, as he emphasized later on (thus anticipating Reception Theory), in which the spectator's role in experiencing what he called "the phenomenon of transmutation" was crucial. So, once more we have a curious short-circuiting between the archaic, or the traditional, and the hyper-modern in the condition of participating in, and reading, the thing: Duchamp insisted on the importance of the inscriptions on some of his readymades, which were meant, he said, "to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions, more verbal." But isn't that what happens so many pre-Columbian objects, including funerary ceramics, and monuments, which are covered with inscriptions? And isn't our lasting object, our museum object, also left to signify this "more verbal" death—a death disincarnated, as in the innumerable calaveras, or dancing skeletons, ubiquitous in Mexico's first Modernist images—and death as a primary condition for all discourse on being and existence? But it is almost taboo for us to speak of this shadowy, yet essential feature of our "art," as Aby Warburg knew well.

We live in an age of supposedly unlimited possibilities and contradictions; our crammed, infinitesimally metered time is nonetheless viewed as endless, unidirectional, and never-returning: In our quantitative (and scientific) frenzy, we may have lost that sense of completion-as-beginning that appears to have informed pre-Columbian thought. In the 1960s Robert Smithson walked through the Maya forests of Southern Mexico to encounter—or rather generate—his own "incidents of travel in Yucatan," multiple reflections of a unique, yet absolute, experiential time-space. The paradox for today's artist is that of the function—and hence authenticity—of his act: not in relation to anything external, but to itself. Reception is crucial, and yet the modern artist must also be ahead of reception. The modern artist, if she or he is to survive as anything other than the pale remnant of a past civilization, will seek a way out of time. History, on the other hand, and art history in particular, bound as they are to tackle the specificity of doing-in-time, are just as confined to dealing with dead bodies as the pre-Columbian craftsmen and thinkers who were so prominently focused on so-called funerary functions. An installation of floating ping-pong balls is dead no matter what their electrical dance may suggest to us, but it is the thought of the object, so to speak, that counts and can be discerned: The thought "in the hand"—as Braque said—

as well as the thought in the mind. Ancient American civilizations have poured immense troves of thought into their objects—forever—some of the care we as modern Northwesterners dedicate to our own objects may help us connect with their world—if only by contrast.

Poets can convey what we are unable to fully express. I wish to close my observations in the margin to this West by Nonwest special issue of Res with some verses from "Prelude to Objects," a luminous poem in Wallace Stevens's Parts of the World (1942):

[...]. It comes to this:
That the guerrilla I should be booked
And bound. Its nigger mystics should change
Foolscap for wigs. Academies
As of a tragic science should rise.