The dominant questions about pictures in recent literature about visual culture and art history have been interpretive and rhetorical. We want to know what pictures mean and what they do: how they communicate as signs and symbols, what sort of power they have to effect human emotions and behavior. When the question of desire is raised, it is usually located in the producers or consumers of images, with the picture treated as an expression of the artist’s desire or as a mechanism for eliciting the desires of the beholder. In this chapter, I’d like to shift the location of desire to images themselves, and ask what pictures want. This question certainly does not mean an abandonment of interpretive and rhetorical issues, but it will, I hope, make the question of pictorial meaning and power appear somewhat different. It will also help us grasp the fundamental shift in art history and other disciplines that is sometimes called visual culture or visual studies, and which I have associated with a pictorial turn in both popular and elite intellectual culture.

To save time, I want to begin with the assumption that we are capable of suspending our disbelief in the very premises of the question, what do pictures want? I’m well aware that this is a bizarre, perhaps even objectionable, question. I’m aware that it involves a subjectivizing of images, a dubious personification of inanimate objects; that it flirts with a regressive, superstitious attitude toward images, one that if taken seriously would return us to practices like totemism, fetishism, idolatry, and animism.1 These are practices that most modern, enlightened people regard with suspicion as primitive, psychotic, or childish in their traditional forms (the worship of material objects; the treating of inanimate objects like dolls as if they were alive) and as pathological symptoms in their modern manifestations (fetishism either of commodities or of neurotic perversion).

I’m also quite aware that the question may seem like a tasteless appropriation of an inquiry that is properly reserved for other people, particularly those classes of people who have been the objects of discrimination, victimized by prejudicial images—“profiled” in stereotype and caricature. The question echoes the whole investigation into the desire of the abject or downcast Other, the minority or subaltern that has been so central to the development of modern studies in gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.2 “What does the black man want?” is the question raised by Franz Fanon, risking the reification of manhood and negritude in a single sentence.3 “What do women want?” is the question Freud found himself unable to answer.4 Women and people of color have struggled to speak directly to these questions, to articulate accounts of their own desire. It is hard to imagine how pictures might do the same, or how any inquiry of this sort could be more than a kind of disingenuous or (at best) unconscious ventriloquism, as if Edgar Bergen were to ask Charlie McCarthy, “What do puppets want?”

1. See chapter 7 of the present text for a detailed discussion of these concepts.
2. The transferability of minority and subaltern characteristics to images will of course be a central issue in what follows. One might begin with a reflection on Gayatri Spivak’s famous question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313. Her answer is no, an answer that is echoed when images are treated as the silent or mute sign, incapable of speech, sound, and negation (in which case the answer to our question might be, pictures want a voice, and a poetics of enunciation). The “minority” position of the image is best seen in Gilles Deleuze’s remarks on the way the poetic process introduces a “stutter” into language that “minories” it, producing “a language of images, resounding and coloring images,” that “bore[s] holes” in language “by means of an ordinary silence, when the voices seem to have died out.” See Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 109, 159.
Nevertheless, I want to proceed as if the question were worth asking, partly as a kind of thought experiment, simply to see what happens, and partly out of a conviction that this is a question we are already asking, that we cannot help but ask, and that therefore deserves analysis. I'm encouraged in this by the precedents of Marx and Freud, who both felt that a modern science of the social and the psychological had to deal with the issue of fetishism and animism, the subjectivity of objects, the personhood of things. Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively; or they look back at us silently across a "gulf unbridged by language." They present not just a surface but a face that faces the beholder. While Marx and Freud both treat the personified, subjectified, animated object with deep suspicion, subtracting their respective fetishes to iconoclastic critique, much of their energy is spent in detailing the processes by which the life of objects is produced in human experience. And it's a real question whether, in Freud's case at least, there is any real prospect of "curing" the malady of fetishism.

My own position is that the subjectivized, animated object in some form or other is an incurable symptom, and that Marx and Freud are better treated as guides to the understanding of this symptom and perhaps to some transformation of it into less pathological, damaging forms. In short, we are stuck with our magical, premodern attitudes toward objects, especially pictures, and our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them, to work through their symptomatology.

5. In saying that pictures have some of the features of personhood, of course, I am begging the question of what a person is. Whatever the answer to that question, it will have to include some account of what it is about persons that makes it possible for pictures to impersonate them as well as represent them. This discussion might start from the origin of the word per-sonare (to "sound through"), which roots the figure of the person in the masks used as iconic figures and as megaphones in Greek tragedy. Persons and personalities, in short, may derive their characteristic features from image-making as much as pictures derive their features from persons.


9. The full documentation of the trope of the personified and "living" work of art in Western art-historical discourse would require a separate essay. Such an essay might begin with a look at the status of the art object in the three canonical "fathers" of art history, Vasari, Winckelmann, and Hegel. It would find, I suspect, that, the progressive and teleological narratives of Western art are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of nature but are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of nature but are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of nature but are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of nature but are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of nature but are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of nature but are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of nature but are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on

The literary treatment of pictures is, of course, quite unabashed in its celebration of their uncanny personhood and vitality, perhaps because the literary image does not have to be faced directly, but is distanced by the secondary mediation of language. Magic portraits, masks, and mirrors, living statues, and haunted houses are everywhere in both modern and traditional literary narratives, and the aura of these imaginary images seeps into both professional and popular attitudes toward real pictures. Art historians may "know" that the pictures they study are only material objects that have been marked with colors and shapes, but they frequently talk and act as if pictures had feeling, will, consciousness, agency, and desire. Everyone knows that a photograph of their mother is not alive, but they will still be reluctant to deface or destroy it. No modern, rational, secular person thinks that pictures are to be treated like persons, but we always seem to be willing to make exceptions for special cases.

And this attitude is not confined to valuable artworks or pictures that have personal significance. Every advertising executive knows that some images, to use the trade jargon, "have legs"—that is, they seem to have a surprisingly capacity to generate new directions and surprising twists in an ad campaign, as if they had an intelligence and purposiveness of their own. When Moses demands that Aaron explain the making of the golden calf, Aaron says that he merely threw the Israelites' gold jewelry into the fire "and this calf came out" (Exod. 32:23 [KJV]), as is if were a self-created auto-
The idea that images have a kind of social or psychological power of their own is, in fact, the reigning cliche of contemporary visual culture. The claim that we live in a society of spectacle, surveillance, and simulacra is not merely an insight of advanced cultural criticism; a sports and advertising icon like Andre Agassi can say that “image is everything” and be understood as speaking not only about images but for images, as someone who was himself seen as “nothing but an image.”

There is no difficulty, then, in demonstrating that the idea of the personhood of pictures (or, at minimum, their animism) is just as alive in the modern world as it was in traditional societies. The difficulty is in knowing what to say next. How are traditional attitudes toward images— idolatry, fetishism, totemism—refunctioned in modern societies? Is our task as cultural critics to demystify these images, to smash the modern idols, to expose the fetishes that enslave people? Is it to discriminate between true and false, healthy and sick, pure and impure, good and evil images? Are images the terrain on which political struggle should be waged, the site on which a new ethics is to be articulated?

There is a strong temptation to answer these questions with a resounding yes, and to take the critique of visual culture as a straightforward strategy of political intervention. This sort of criticism proceeds by exposing images as agents of ideological manipulation and actual human damage. At one extreme is the claim of legal theorist Catherine MacKinnon that pornography is not just a representation of violence toward and degradation of women but an act of violent degradation, and that pornographic pictures—especially photographic and cinematic images—are themselves agents of violence. There are also the familiar and less controversial arguments in the political critique of visual culture: that Hollywood cinema constructs women as objects of the “male gaze”; that the unlettered masses are manipulated by the images of visual media and popular culture; that people of color are subject to graphic stereotypes and racist visual discrimination; that art museums are a kind of hybrid form of religious temple and bank in which commodity fetishes are displayed for rituals of public veneration that are designed to produce surplus aesthetic and economic value.

I want to say that all these arguments have some truth to them (in fact, I’ve made many of them myself), but also that there is something radically unsatisfactory about them. Perhaps the most obvious problem is that the critical exposure and demolition of the nefarious power of images is both easy and ineffectual. Pictures are a popular political antagonist because one can take a tough stand on them, and yet, at the end of the day, everything remains pretty much the same. Scopic regimes can be overturned repeatedly without any visible effect on either visual or political culture. In MacKinnon’s case, the brilliance, passion, and futility of this enterprise is quite evident. Are the energies of a progressive, humane politics that seeks social and economic justice really well spent on a campaign to stamp out pornography? Or is this at best a mere symptom of political frustration, at worst a real diversion of progressive political energy into collaboration with dubious forms of political reaction? Or even better, is MacKinnon’s treatment of images as if they had agency a kind of testimony to the incorrigible character of our tendency to personify and animat images? Could political futility lead us toward iconological insight?

In any event, it may be time to rein in our notions of the political stakes in a critique of visual culture, and to scale down the rhetoric of the “power of images.” Images are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think. The problem is to refine and complicate our estimate of their power and the way it works. That is why I shift the question from what pictures do to what they want, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak. If the power of images is like the

10. Pier Bori notes that the “self-creating” account of the making of the calf was a crucial part of the exultation of Aaron (and the condemnation of the Jewish people) by the church fathers. Macarius the Great, for instance, describes the gold thrown into the fire as “turned into an idol as if the fire imitated [the people’s] decision” (Bori, The Golden Calf [Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1990], 19).
11. Or wings. My colleague Wu Hung tells me that flying statues of Buddha were a common phenomenon in Chinese legends.
13. The most egregious example of this shadow politics is the industry of psychological testing designed to show that video games are the causal agent in youth violence. Supported by political interests that would prefer an iconic, “cultural” scapegoat to some attention to the actual instruments of violence, namely guns, enormous amounts of public money are spent annually to support “research” (sic) on the impact of video games. For more details see http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/news_events.html#Conf for an account of “The Arts and Humanities in Public Life 2001: Playing by the Rules: The Cultural Policy Challenges of Video Games,” a conference held at the University of Chicago October 26–27, 2001.
power of the weak, that may be why their desire is correspondingly strong: to make up for their actual impotence. We as critics may want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them.

The subaltern model of the picture, on the other hand, opens up the actual dialectics of power and desire in our relations with pictures. When Fanon reflects on negritude, he describes it as a "corpo-real malediction" that is hurled in the immediacy of the visual encounter, "Look, a Negro." But the construction of the racial and racist stereotype is not a simple exercise of the picture as a technique of domination. It is the knotting of a double bind that afflicts both the subject and the object of racism in a complex of desire and hatred. The ocular violence of racism splits its object in two, rending and rendering it simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, an object of, in Fanon's words, "abomination" and "adoration." Abomination and adoration are precisely the terms in which idolatry is exorcized in the Bible: it is because the idol is adored that it must be abominated by the iconophobe. The idol, like the black man, is both despised and worshipped, reviled for being a nonentity, a slave, and feared as an alien and supernatural power. If idolatry is the most dramatic form of image power known to visual culture, it is a remarkably ambivalent and ambiguous kind of force. Insofar as visuality and visual culture are infected by a kind of "guilt by association" with idolatry and the evil eye of racism, it is no wonder that intellectual historian Martin Jay can think of the "eye" itself as something that is repeatedly "cast down" (or plucked out) in Western culture, and vision as something that has been repeatedly subjected to "denigration." If pictures are persons, then, they are colored or marked persons, and the scandal of the purely white or purely black canvas, the blank, unmarked surface, presents quite a different face.

As for the gender of pictures, it's clear that the "default" position of images is feminine, "constructing spectatorship," in art historian Norman Bryson's words, "around an opposition between woman as image and man as the bearer of the look"—not images of women, but images as women. The question of what pictures want, then, is inseparable from the question of what women want. Long before Freud, Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" staged a narrative around the question, "What is it that women most desire?" This question is posed to a knight who has been found guilty of raping a lady of the court, and who is given a one-year reprieve on his death sentence to go in quest of the right answer. If he returns with the wrong answer, the death sentence will be carried out. The knight hears many wrong answers from the women he interviews—money, reputation, love, beauty, fine clothes, lust abed, many admirers. The right answer turns out to be maistry, a complex middle-English term that equivocates between "mastery" by right or consent, and the power that goes with superior strength or cunning. The official moral of Chaucer's tale is that consensual, freely given mastery is best, but Chaucer's narrator, the cynical and worldly Wife of Bath, knows that women want (that is, lack) power, and they will take whatever kind they can get.

What is the moral for pictures? If one could interview all the pictures one encounters in a year, what answers would they give? Surely, many of the pictures would give Chaucer's "wrong" answers: that is, pictures would want to be worth a lot of money; they would want to be admired and praised as

15. For a subtle analysis of this double bind, see Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66–84.
16. Ralph Ellison's classic novel, The Invisible Man, renders this paradox most vividly: it is because the invisible man is hypervisible that (in another sense) he is invisible.
17. "To us, the man who adores the Negro is as 'sick' as the man who abominates him" (Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 8).
18. See, for instance, the description of the idol of Ashforeth, "the abomination of Sidonians, and Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and... Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites" (2 Kings 23:13 [KJV]), and Isaiah 44:39: shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood? The online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary lays out the doubtful etymology: "Abominable, regularly spelt abominable, and explained as ab homine, and explained as 'away from man, inhuman, beastly.'" The association of the animate image with beasts is, I suspect, a crucial feature of pictorial desire. Abomination is also a term regularly applied to "unclean" or taboo animals in the Bible. See Carlo Ginzburg on the idol as a "monstrous" image presenting impossible "composite" forms that combine human and animal features in "Idols and Likenesses: Origen, Homilies on Exodus VIII.3, and Its Reception," in Sight & Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich at 85 (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), 55–67.
21. My thanks to Jay Schlesinger for his help with the Chaucerian notion of maistry.
beautiful; they would want to be adored by many lovers. But above all they would want a kind of mastery over the beholder. Art historian and critic Michael Fried summarizes painting's "primordial convention" in precisely these terms: "a painting. . . had first to attract the beholder, then to arrest and finally to enthrall the beholder, that is a painting had to call to someone, bring him to a halt in front of itself and hold him there as if spellbound and unable to move."22 The paintings' desire, in short, is to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture in what might be called "the Medusa effect." This effect is perhaps the clearest demonstration we have that the power of pictures and of women is modeled on one another, and that this is a model of both pictures and women that is abject, mutilated, and castrated.23 The power they want is manifested as lack, not as possession.

We could no doubt elaborate the linkage between pictures, femininity, and negritude much more fully, taking into account other variations on the subaltern status of images in terms of other models of gender, sexual identity, cultural location, and even species identity (suppose, for instance, that the desires of pictures were modeled on the desires of animals? What does Wittgenstein mean in his frequent reference to certain pervasive philosophical metaphors as "queer pictures").24 But I want to turn now simply to the model of Chaucer's quest and see what happens if we question pictures about their desires instead of looking at them as vehicles of meaning or instruments of power.

I begin with a picture that wears its heart on its sleeve, the famous "Uncle Sam" recruiting poster for the U.S. Army designed by James Montgomery Flagg during World War I (fig. 7). This is an image whose demands if not desires seem absolutely clear, focused on a determinate object: it wants "you," that is, the young men of eligible age for military service.25 The immediate aim of the picture appears to be a version of the Medusa effect: that is, it "hails" the viewer verbally and tries to transfix him with the directness of its gaze and (its most wonderful pictorial feature) foreshortened pointing finger that single out the viewer, accusing, designating, and commanding him. But the desire to transfix is only a transitory and momentary goal. The longer range motive is to move and mobilize the beholder, to send him on to the "nearest recruiting station" and ultimately overseas to fight and possibly die for his country.

So far, however, this is only a reading of what might be called the overt signs of positive desire. The gesture of the pointing or beckoning hand is a common feature of the modern recruiting poster (fig. 8). To go any further than this, we need to ask what the picture wants in terms of lack. Here the contrast of the U.S. with the German recruiting poster is clarifying. The latter is an image in which a young soldier hails his brothers, calls them to the brotherhood of honorable death in battle. In contrast, Uncle Sam, as his name indicates, has a more tenuous, indirect relation to the potential recruit. He is an older man who lacks the youthful vigor for combat, and perhaps even more important, lacks the direct blood connection that a figure of the fatherland would evoke. He asks young men to go fight and die in a war in which neither he nor his sons will participate. There are no "sons" of Uncle Sam, only "real live nephews," as George M. Cohan put it; Uncle Sam himself is sterile, a kind of abstract, pasteboard figure who has no body, no blood, but who impersonates the nation and calls for other men's sons to donate their bodies and their blood. It's only appropriate that he is a pictorial descendant of British caricatures of "Yankee Doodle," a figure of ridicule that adorned the pages of Punch throughout the nineteenth century. His ultimate ancestor is a real person, "Uncle Sam" Wilson, a supplier of beef to the U.S. Army during the War of 1812. One can imagine a scene in which the original prototype for Uncle Sam is addressing not a group of young men but a herd of cattle about to be slaughtered. Small wonder that this image was so readily appropriated for parodic inversion in the figure of

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25. I am invoking here the Lacanian distinction between desire, demand, and need. Jonathan Scott Lee provides a helpful gloss: "desire is that which is manifested in the inter-val that demand hollows out within itself... it is... what is evoked by any demand beyond the need articulated in it" (Lee, Jacques Lacan [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991], 58). See also Slavoj Žižek, Looking Awry (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 134. The verb "to want" can, of course, suggest any of these meanings (desire, demand, need), depending on the context. Žižek has pointed out to me that it would be perverse to read Uncle Sam's "I want you" as "I desire you" rather than as an expression of demand or need. Nonetheless, it will soon be evident just how perverse this picture is!
“Uncle Osama” urging the young men of America to go to war against Iraq (fig. 9).

So what does this picture want? A full analysis would take us deep into the political unconscious of a nation that is nominally imagined as a disembodied abstraction, an Enlightenment polity of laws and not men, principles and not blood relationships, and actually embodied as a place where old white men send young men and women of all races (including a disproportionate high number of colored people) to fight their wars. What this real and imagined nation lacks is meat—bodies and blood—and what it sends to obtain them is a hollow man, a meat supplier, or perhaps just an artist. The contemporary model for the Uncle Sam poster, as it turns out, was James Montgomery Flagg himself. Uncle Sam is thus a self-portrait of the patriotic American artist in national drag, reproducing himself in millions of identical prints, the sort of fertility that is available to images and to artists. The “disembodiment” of his mass-produced image is countered by its concrete embodiment and location as picture in relation to recruiting stations (and the bodies of real recruits) all over the nation.

Given this background, you might think it a wonder that this poster had any power or effectiveness at all as a recruiting device, and indeed, it would be very difficult to know anything about the real power of the image. What one can describe, however, is its construction of desire in relation to fantasies of power and impotence. Perhaps the image’s subtle candor about its bloodless sterility as well as its origins in commerce and caricature combine to make it seem so appropriate a symbol of the United States.

Sometimes the expression of a want signifies lack rather than the power to command or make demands, as in the Warner Bros. promotional poster of entertainer Al Jolson for its movie The Jazz Singer (fig. 10), whose hand gestures connote beseeching and pleading, declarations of love for a "Mammy" and an audience that is to be moved to the theater, not to the recruiting office. What this picture wants, as distinct from what its depicted figure asks for, is a stable relation between figure and ground, a way of demarcating body from space, skin from clothing, the exterior of the body from its interior. And this is what it cannot have, for the stigmata of race and body image are dissolved into a shuttle of shifting black-and-white spaces that "flicker" before us like the cinematic medium itself and the scene of racial masquerade it promises. It is as if this masquerade finally reduced to a fixation on the orifices and organs of the body as zones of indistinction, eyes, mouth, and hands fetishized as illuminated gateways between the invisible and visible man, inner whiteness and outer blackness. "I am black but O my soul is white," says William Blake; but the windows of the soul are triply inscribed as ocular, oral, and tactile in this image—an invitation to see, feel, and speak beyond the veil of racial difference. What the picture awakens our desire to see, as Jacques Lacan might put it, is exactly what it cannot show. This impotence is what gives it whatever specific power it has.27

Sometimes the disappearance of the object of visual desire in a picture is a direct trace of the activity of generations of viewers, as in the Byzantine miniature from the eleventh century (fig. 11). The figure of Christ, like that of Uncle Sam and Al Jolson, directly addresses the viewer, here with the verses from Psalm 77: “Give heed, O my people to my law; incline your ear to the words of my mouth.” What is clear from the physical evidence of the picture, however, is that ears have not been inclined to the words of the mouth so much as mouths have been pressed to the lips of the image, wearing away its face to near oblivion. These are viewers who have followed the advice of John of Damascus “to embrace [images] with the eyes, the lips, the heart.”28 Like Uncle Sam, this icon is an image that wants the beholder’s body and blood and spirit; unlike Uncle Sam, it gives away its own body in the encounter, in a kind of pictorial reenactment of the eucharistic sacrifice. The defacement of the image is not a desecration but a sign of devotion, a recirculation of the painted body in the body of the beholder.

These sorts of direct expressions of pictorial desire are, of course, generally associated with "vulgar" modes of imaging—commercial advertising and political or religious propaganda. The picture as subaltern makes an appeal or issues a demand whose precise effect and power emerges in an intersubjective encounter compounded of signs of positive desire and traces of lack or impotence. What of the "work of art" proper, the aesthetic object that is simply supposed to "be" in its autonomous beauty or sublimity? One answer is provided by Michael Fried, who argues that the emergence of modern art is precisely to be understood in terms of the negation or

26. The distinction between the disembodied, immaterial image and the concrete picture will be discussed further in chapter 4.

27. For more on the dialectics of blackface, and the animation of racial stereotypes and caricatures, see chapter 14.

**Figure 7**
James Montgomery Flagg, Uncle Sam, World War I.

**Figure 9**
Uncle Osama. Image provided courtesy of TomPaine.com, a project of the nonprofit Florence Fund.

**Figure 8**

**Figure 10**
Warner Bros. poster of Al Jolson for The Jazz Singer.
renunciation of direct signs of desire. The process of pictorial seduction he admires is successful precisely in proportion to its indirectness, its seeming indifference to the beholder, its antitheatrical "absorption" in its own internal drama. The very special sort of pictures that enthral him get what they want by seeming not to want anything, by pretending that they have everything they need. Fried's discussions of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's Soup Bubbles and Théodore Géricault's Raft of the Medusa (figs. 12, 13) might be taken as exemplary here, and help us to see that it is not merely a question of what the figures in the pictures appear to want, the legible signs of desire that they convey. This desire may be enraptured and contemplative, as it is in Soup Bubbles, where the shimmering and trembling globe that absorbs the figure becomes "a natural correlative for [Chardin's] own engrossment in the act of painting and a proleptic mirroring of what he trusted would be the absorption of the beholder before the finished work."

FIGURE 11


Or it may be violent, as in *Raft of the Medusa*, where the “strivings of the men on the raft” are not simply to be understood in relation to its internal composition and the sign of the rescue ship on the horizon, “but also by the need to escape our gaze, to put an end to being beheld by us, to be rescued from the ineluctable fact of a presence that threatens to theatricalize even their sufferings.”

The end point of this sort of pictorial desire is, I think, the purism of modernist abstraction, whose negation of the beholder’s presence is articulated in theorist Wilhelm Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy*, and displayed in its final reduction in the white paintings of the early Robert Rauschenberg, whose surfaces the artist regarded as “hypersensitive membranes . . . registering the slightest phenomenon on their blanched white skins.” Abstract paintings are pictures that want not to be pictures, pictures that want to be liberated from image-making. But the desire not to show desire is, as Lacan reminds us, still a form of desire. The whole anti-theatrical tradition reminds one again of the default feminization of the picture, which is treated as something that must awaken desire in the beholder while not disclosing any signs of desire or even awareness that it is being beheld, as if the beholder were a voyeur at a keyhole.

Barbara Kruger’s photo collage “Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face” (fig. 14) speaks rather directly to this purist or puritanical account of pictorial desire. The marble face in the picture, like the absorbed face of Chardin’s boy with a bubble, is shown in profile, oblivious to the gaze of the spectator or the harsh beam of light that rakes its features from above. The inwardness of the figure, its blank eyes and stony absence of expression, make it seem beyond desire, in that state of pure serenity we associate with classical beauty. But the verbal labels glued onto the picture send an absolutely contrary message: “your gaze hits the side of my face.” If we read these words as spoken by the statue, the whole look of the face suddenly changes, as if it were a living person who had just been turned to stone, and the spectator were in the Medusa position, casting her violent, baleful gaze upon the picture. But the placement and segmentation of the inscription

(30) Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in Caroline Jones, “Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993), 647. The negative relation of abstraction to Worringer’s concept of empathy is explored more fully in chapter 11 of the present text. The trope of the painted surface as a sensitive skin is literalized in the temperature-sensitive paintings of Berlin artist Jurgen Mayer, which invite—in fact demand and need—a tactile response from the beholder to have their proper effect.

desire of the silent, still image for voice and motion—a demand quite literally fulfilled by the technical characteristics of the cinematic image.

So what do pictures want? Are there any general conclusions to be drawn from this hasty survey?

My first thought is that, despite my opening gesture of moving away from questions of meaning and power to the question of desire, I have continually circled back to the procedures of semiotics, hermeneutics, and rhetoric. The question of what pictures want certainly does not eliminate the interpretation of signs. All it accomplishes is a subtle dislocation of the target of interpretation, a slight modification in the picture we have of pictures (and perhaps signs) themselves. The keys to this modification/dislocation are (1) assent to the constitutive fiction of pictures as "animated" beings, quasi-agents, mock persons; and (2) the construal of pictures not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference, and who function both as "go-betweens" and scapegoats in the social field of human visuality. It's crucial to this strategic shift that we not confuse the desire of the picture with the desires of the artist, the beholder, or even the figures in the picture. What pictures want is not the same as the message they communicate or the effect they produce; it's not even the same as what they say they want. Like people, pictures may not know what they want; they have to be helped to recollect it through a dialogue with others.

I could have made this inquiry harder by looking at abstract paintings (pictures that want not be pictures) or at genres such as landscape where personhood emerges only as a "filigree," to use Lacan's expression. I begin with the face as the primordial object and surface of mimesis, from the tattooed visage to painted faces. But the question of desire may be addressed to any picture, and this chapter is nothing more than a suggestion to try it out for yourself.

What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology. Contemporary discussions of visual culture often seem distracted by a rhetoric of innovation and modernization. They want to update art history by playing catch-up with the text-based disciplines and with the study of film and mass culture. They want to erase the distinctions between high and low culture and transform "the history of art into the history of images." They want to "break" with art history's supposed reliance on naive notions of "resemblance or mimesis," the superstitious "natural attitudes" toward pictures that seem so difficult to stamp out. They appeal to "semiotic" or "discursive" models of images that will reveal them as projections of ideology, technologies of domination to be resisted by clear-sighted critique.

It's not so much that this idea of visual culture is wrong or fruitless. On the contrary, it has produced a remarkable transformation in the sleepy confines of academic art history. But is that all we want? Or (more to the point) is that all that pictures want? The most far-reaching shift signaled by the search for an adequate concept of visual culture is its emphasis on the social field of the visual, the everyday processes of looking at others and being looked at. This complex field of visual reciprocity is not merely a byproduct of social reality but actively constitutive of it. Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the "sign," or to discourse. Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled into a "history of images" nor elevated into a "history of art," but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities.
They want a hermeneutic that would return to the opening gesture of art historian Erwin Panofsky’s iconology, before Panofsky elaborates his method of interpretation and compares the initial encounter with a picture to a meeting with “an acquaintance” who “greets me on the street by removing his hat.”

What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshipped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their beholders, or to enthrall their beholders. They may not even want to be granted subjectivity or personhood by well-meaning commentators who think that humanness is the greatest compliment they could pay to pictures. The desires of pictures may be inhuman or nonhuman, better modeled by figures of animals, machines, or cyborgs, or by even more basic images—what Erasmus Darwin called “the loves of plants.” What pictures want in the last instance, then, is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all.

Coda: Frequently Asked Questions

The following questions have been raised by a number of respondents to this chapter. I’m especially grateful to Charles Harrison, Lauren Berlant, Teresa de Lauretis, Terry Smith, Mary Kelly, Eric Santner, Arnold Davidson, Marina Grzinic, Geoffrey Harpham, Evonne Levy, Françoise Meltzer, and Joel Snyder for their generous interventions.

1. I find that when I try to apply the question, what do pictures want? to specific works of art and images, I don’t know where to start. How does one proceed to ask, much less answer, this question? No method is being offered here. This might be thought of more as an invitation to a conversational opening or an improvisation in which the outcome is somewhat indeter-

37. In Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology.” See my discussion in “Iconology and Ideology: Panofsky, Althusser, and the Scene of Recognition.” In shifting the encounter with a picture from a model of reading or interpretation to a scene of recognition, acknowledgment, and (what might be called) enunciation/annunciation, I am of course building upon Althusser’s notion of interpellation or “hailing” as the primal scene of ideology, and Lacan’s concept of the gaze as the moment when one experiences oneself as seen by the Other. See also James Elkins’s interesting study, The Object Looks Back (New York: Harvest Books, 1997).

38. I’m thinking here of Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s explorations of relationality and “the communication of forms” in Arts of Impoverishment (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). See discussion of this point and the problem of treating “our relations with art works as an allegory for our relation to persons” in “A Conversation with Leo Bersani,” October 82 (Fall 1997): 14.

39. This might be seen as a way of going a bit further with Michael Baxandall’s astute insight that our language about pictures is “a representation of thinking about having seen the picture,” i.e., “we address a relationship between picture and concepts” (Baxandall, Patterns of Intention [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985], 11). Baxandall observes that this “is an alarmingly mobile and fragile object of explanation,” but also “exceedingly flexible and alive” (110). My suggestion here is to take the vitalist analogy one step further and to see the picture not just as an object of description or ekphrasis that comes alive in our perceptual/verbal/conceptual play around it, but as a thing that is always already addressing us (potentially) as a subject with a life that has to be seen as “its own” in order for our descriptions to engage the picture’s life as well as our own lives as beholders. This means the question is not just what did the picture mean (to its first historical beholders) or what does it mean to us now, but what did (and does) the picture want from its beholders then and now.
boundary exclude? What does its angle of representation prevent us from seeing, and prevent it from showing? What does it need or demand from the beholder to complete its work?

For instance, the tableau of Diego Velázquez's Las Meninas (fig. 15) invokes the fiction of being surprised by the spectator, as if "caught in the act." The picture invites us to participate in this game and to find ourselves not just literally in the mirror on the back wall but in the recognizing gazes of the figures—the infanta, her maids, the artist himself. This, at any rate, looks like the explicit demand of the picture, what it claims to need as a minimum for grasping its magic. But of course the "brute facts" are quite the opposite, and are signaled explicitly by a brute—the nearest figure in the picture, the sleepy, oblivious dog in the foreground. The picture only pretends to welcome us, the mirror does not really reflect us or its first beholders, the king and queen of Spain, but rather (as Joel Snyder has shown) reflects the hidden image on the canvas that Velázquez is working on. All these feints and deceptions remind us of the most literal fact about the picture: that the figures in it do not really "look back" at us; they only appear to do so. One might want to say, of course, that this is just a primordial convention of pictures as such, their innate doubleness and duplicity, looking back at us with eyes that cannot see. Las Meninas, however, stages this convention in an enhanced, extreme form, posing its tableau vivant for sovereign beholders whose authority is subtly called into question even as it is complimented. This is a picture that wants nothing from us while pretending to be totally oriented toward us.

So it is important to keep in mind that in the game called What Do Pictures Want? one possible answer to the question is "nothing": some pictures might be capable of wanting (needing, lacking, requiring, demanding, seeking) nothing at all, which would make them autonomous, self-sufficient, perfect, beyond desire. This may be the condition we attribute to pictures that we think of as great works of art, and we might want to criticize it; but first we need to understand it as a logical possibility entailed in the very notion of a living thing beyond desire.41

2. The whole effort to portray pictures as animated beings raises a set of prior questions that are not fully answered here. What constitutes "animation" or vitality? What defines a living organism as distinct from an inanimate object? Isn't the notion of the living image a mere conceit that has gotten out of control? A biology textbook by Helena Curtis42 gives the following crite-


41. The position beyond desire is, to my mind, what Michael Fried is gesturing toward in his notions of absorption, presence, grace, and the "conviction" elicited by the authentic masterpiece. See the discussion of "Art and Objecthood" in chapter 7 of the present text, and in Picture Theory, chap. 7.

ria for the living organism: living things are highly organized, homeostatic (stay the same), grow and develop, are adapted, take energy from the environment and change it from one form to another, respond to stimuli, and reproduce themselves. The first thing that must strike us about this list is its internal contradictions and fuzziness. Homeostasis is clearly incompatible with growth and development. "Highly organized" could characterize an automobile or a bureaucracy as well as an organism. Taking energy from the environment and changing it to another form is a common feature of machines as well as organisms. "Responding to stimuli" is vague enough to cover photographic emulsions, weather vanes, and billiard balls. And organisms do not, strictly speaking, reproduce themselves when they have offspring—they produce new specimens which are usually of the same species as themselves; only clones can come close to being identical reproductions of themselves. There is, as philosopher Michael Thompson has demonstrated, no "real definition" of life, no set of unambiguous empirical criteria to differentiate living from nonliving substance (including, it must be said, the presence of DNA, which Thompson correctly identifies as the fetish concept of our time). Life is rather what Hegel called a "logical category," one of the primitive concepts that grounds the whole process of dialectical reasoning and understanding. Indeed, the best definition of a living thing is a straightforward dialectical statement: a living thing is something that can die.

The question remains, however: how do pictures resemble life-forms? Are they born? Can they die? Can they be killed? Some of Curtis’s criteria don’t fit pictures in any obvious way and require modification. "Growth and development" might characterize the process by which an image is realized in a concrete picture or work of art, but once completed, the work is normally homeostatic (unless we think its aging and reception history constitutes a kind of "development" like that of a life-form; remember that Walter Benjamin thought that history and tradition were exactly what conferred "aura"—literally, "breath"—on the work of art). A similar point might be made about the taking of energy from the environment, unless we think of the mental energy required of the beholder as coming from the environment and returning transformed in the act of reception. The response to stimuli is realized literally in certain "interactive" artworks, figuratively in more traditional works. As for "reproducing themselves," what else is implied when the proliferation of images is discussed in biological figures as a kind of epidemic, as implied in the title of theorist Slavoj Žižek’s *The Plague of Fantasies?* How do fantasies come to be like an infectious disease, an out-of-control virus or bacteria? Dismissing these as "merely figurative" forms of life or animation begs the question that is at issue: the life of images, pictures, and figures, including, obviously, their figurative life. The uncontrollability of the concept of the living image is itself an example of the problem: why does this metaphor seem to have a life of its own? Why is it so routine that we call it a "dead" metaphor, implying that it was once alive and might come alive again?

But rather than allow the biology textbooks to dictate what it means to think of a picture as a living thing, we might be better advised to start from our own ordinary ways of talking about pictures as if they were animated. The praise of the "lifelike" image is, of course, as old as image-making, and the liveliness of an image may be quite independent of its accuracy as a representation. The uncanny ability of pictured faces to "look back" and in the technique of omnivariance to seem to follow us with their eyes is well established. Digitized and virtual imaging now make it possible to simulate the turning of the face or the body to follow the movement of the spectator. Indeed, the whole distinction between the still and moving image (or, for that matter, the silent and talking image) has routinely been articulated as a question of life. Why is the moving image invariably characterized with vitalist metaphors such as "animation" and "live action"? Why is it not enough to say that the images move, that actions are depicted? Familiarity blinds us to the strange life of these figures; it makes them dead metaphors at the same time it asserts their vitality. To make an image is to mortify and resurrect in the same gesture. Film animation begins, as is well known, not with just any old image material but with the fossil, and the reanimation of extinct life. Winsor McCay, the father of animation, films himself in "live action" sequences viewing the skeleton of a dinosaur in a natural history museum, and wagering his fellow artists that he can bring this creature back to life in three months, a magical feat he pulls off with one of the earliest examples of film animation.45

43. Thompson, "The Representation of Life."
44. See the discussion of the "lives of buildings" in Neil Harris, *Building Lives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), and in chapter 1 above.
Cinema theorist André Bazin opens his discussion of “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” by animating and personifying image-making in a single gesture: “if the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of emblaming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation.” Bazin assures us, however, that modern, critical consciousness has overcome archaic superstitions about images, corpses, and mummification, and his invocation of psychoanalysis is meant to reassure us of that: “No one believes any longer in the ontological identity of model and image; now the image simply ‘helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death’” (10). But within a few pages Bazin is directly contradicting himself, and asserting a greater magic for photography than was ever possible for painting: “The photographic image is the object itself. . . . It shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model” (14). If Winsor McCay’s animation brought the fossilized creature back to life, Bazin’s images do just the opposite: photography “preserve[s] the object, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact . . . in amber,” and the cinematic image is “change mummified, as it were” (14–15). One wonders if director Steven Spielberg was remembering this passage when he decided to use the preservation of dinosaur blood and DNA in the bodies of mosquitoes as the technical premise for the resurrection of dinosaurs in Jurassic Park.

So there is no use dismissing the notion of the living image as a mere metaphor or an archaism. It is better seen as an incorrigible, unavoidable metaphor that deserves analysis. One might begin by thinking through the category of life itself in terms of the square of opposition that governs its dialectics:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{living} & \text{dead} & \text{inanimate} \\
\text{living} & \text{dead} & \text{undead}
\end{array}
\]

The living organism has two logical opposites or contraries: the dead object (the corpse, mummy, or fossil), which was once alive, and the inanimate object (inert, inorganic), which never was alive. The third opposition is, then, the negation of the negation, the return (or arrival) of life in the


4. You ask us to believe that pictures have desires, but you do not explain what desire is. What theory of desire are you working from? How is desire to be pictured? What model, theory, or image of desire is operating in the desire of pictures? Is this human desire, and if so, what is that? Why do you plunge into the topic of “what pictures want” without first establishing a theoretical framework, such as the psychoanalytic account of desire (Freud, Lacan, Žižek; questions of libido, eros, the drives, fantasy, symptoms, object choice, etc.)?

This question deserves an essay all to itself, which is provided by the next chapter.

Let us say, “This is no life.”

The question is this: picture we have an invisible and accessible to desire with the never see, muddle, beautiful, self, its scene, familiar person, his bow and arrow, doubly represents as an arrow, an agent (the very act of desire), or is it the image-making of their own image, according to God, has

1. Cuprum: art is perhaps a concept. My t...