

THE COST OF SYMPATHY: TOWARDS A VISUAL ECONOMICS OF
JOHN WEBBER'S 'ATLAS'

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Carlo Ginzburg's essay 'To Kill a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance' explores eighteenth-century concerns surrounding natural law.¹ In Diderot's 'A Conversation of a Father with His Children' as Ginzburg relates, a hatmaker confesses to having taken his wife's dowry, despite the fact that it should have gone to her relatives. The hatmaker resolves to 'go away to Genova' and departs. A conversation then ensues between the father and his children who heard the confession in which it is agreed that distance in place and time 'weaken[s] feelings and awareness of all kinds, even the consciousness of crime.'² David Hume comes to a similar conclusion to Diderot, 'sympathy . . . is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous.'³ For Hume, man's solipsistic preoccupation with his immediate concerns means that he has as little thought to the future as to what is happening far away. Adam Smith too explores this problem with sympathy, hypothesising that if an earthquake swallowed up everyone in China it might provoke some 'humane sentiments' from 'a man of humanity in Europe,' but after these were expressed, 'he would pursue his business or his pleasure . . . with the same ease and tranquility, as if no such accident had happened.'⁴

How to manage the selfishness of our sentiments forms the central theme in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790). For Smith, it is our own sense of equity and justice that is capable of correcting our selfish passions; this moral awareness he terms 'the impartial spectator.'⁵ A problem Smith wrestled with throughout the writing and revising of this book was how the 'impartial spectator' can ever truly know what is equitable and just. If we learn what is morally justifiable through sympathetic engagement with others, how can we form judgements independent of our own social conditioning? As Fonna

Forman-Barzilai argues, in his many revisions of the text, Smith moves from ‘describing conscience in sociological terms to establishing the independence of conscience’ imagining the ‘impartial spectator’ as a quasi-theological, transcendent entity that exists in each of us.⁶ This ‘man within’ is the only way we have of ‘correcting the natural misrepresentations of self-love,’ of learning ‘the real littleness of ourselves.’⁷

In modern times, both Hume’s and Smith’s concepts of sympathy have been placed under enormous strain. After such events as World War Two and Vietnam, Ginzburg finds little evidence for the existence of Smith’s ‘impartial spectator,’ ending his essay with the doleful thought that our ‘capacity to pollute and destroy the present, the past, and the future’ is far greater than our ‘feeble moral imagination.’⁸ Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* argues that, rather than weakening with distance, as Hume maintains, along with Smith, sympathy is better understood as a rehearsed response designed to maintain our distance from the pain of others. While, in terms of our reactions to images of foreign conflict, sympathy acts as a sort of alibi, that removes any guilt the privileged may feel in having caused this suffering or equally in having failed to do anything about it. With no other function than to assert our innocence and our impotence, it is, for Sontag, ‘an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response.’⁹

Whilst acknowledging such modern critiques of sympathy, it is largely eighteenth-century philosophical concerns I address here, my focus being to explore the visual potentialities of sympathy in the work of John Webber, the artist who accompanied Captain Cook on his third voyage (1776–1780). I will take as my object Webber’s final state watercolours, which were engraved between 1781 and 1783 and published as a separate ‘Atlas,’ the fourth of the four volumes that made up the official account, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (London, 1784). This visual record of the voyage forms its own coherent narrative cycle, one that employs many techniques to engage the sympathies of its eighteenth-century consumer. Taking Smith’s notion that we can only relate to others sympathetically through the mediation of the ‘impartial spectator’, this two-way mirror within the self, which observes and regulates it, how, one may ask, does Webber’s own sympathetic practice as an artist intersect with Smith’s understanding of sympathy? Does his work serve to visually construct the existence of this self-regulating self, effectively externalising what is essentially an internal process? If so, how is this achieved,

and if it is not, what pressures do Webber's works place on Smith's 'impartial spectator' and other eighteenth-century notions of sympathy?

A Morai in Atooi

A Morai in Atooi, (1781, figure 1), a depiction of a temple or *marai* in the Hawai'ian Island of Kaua'i, is unusual in Webber's works from the Pacific and indeed the works of any of Cook's onboard artists, being the only published landscape view in which there are no human figures present. Instead, as the text makes clear, we are presented with an empty burial site:

... near the middle of the *morai* ... were the graves of three Chiefs; and before them, was an oblong, inclosed space, to which our conductor also gave the name *Tangata-taboo*; telling us, so explicitly, that we could not mistake his meaning, that three human sacrifices had been buried there; that is, one at the funeral of each Chief.¹⁰

Webber's image prioritises the formal relations between objects in space, which though strange and foreign appear uncannily familiar in their arrangement. The imposition of this geometric authority when set against the carved forms within the *marai* might suggest symmetrical relations between acts of inscribing and perhaps points of intellectual contact between Europeans and Polynesians. Much work has been done in exploring cross-cultural transactions between Cook and his crewmembers and the peoples they encountered. David Turnbull's comparative study of the chart produced by the Tahitian Tupaia and Cook's own maps is a case in point.¹¹ Simon Schaffer has argued that European and Polynesian forms of inscription can be usefully examined in relation to the act of tattooing practised on and by western eighteenth-century visitors.¹² Like Schaffer, Nicholas Thomas has sought to explore analogies and misunderstandings between Europeans and Pacific Islanders and their cultural and symbolic capital.¹³ However as Thomas also asserts, the material culture of Polynesia does not lend itself to European discourses on art, nor can it be fitted into what Bruno Latour describes as Cook's 'cartography of [a] unified world.'¹⁴ The 'cartographic méconnaissance' that Turnbull identifies in Cook's failure to read Tupaia's chart highlights the fact that, far from communicating *so explicitly that meanings could not be mistaken*, to paraphrase Cook, such encounters largely involved

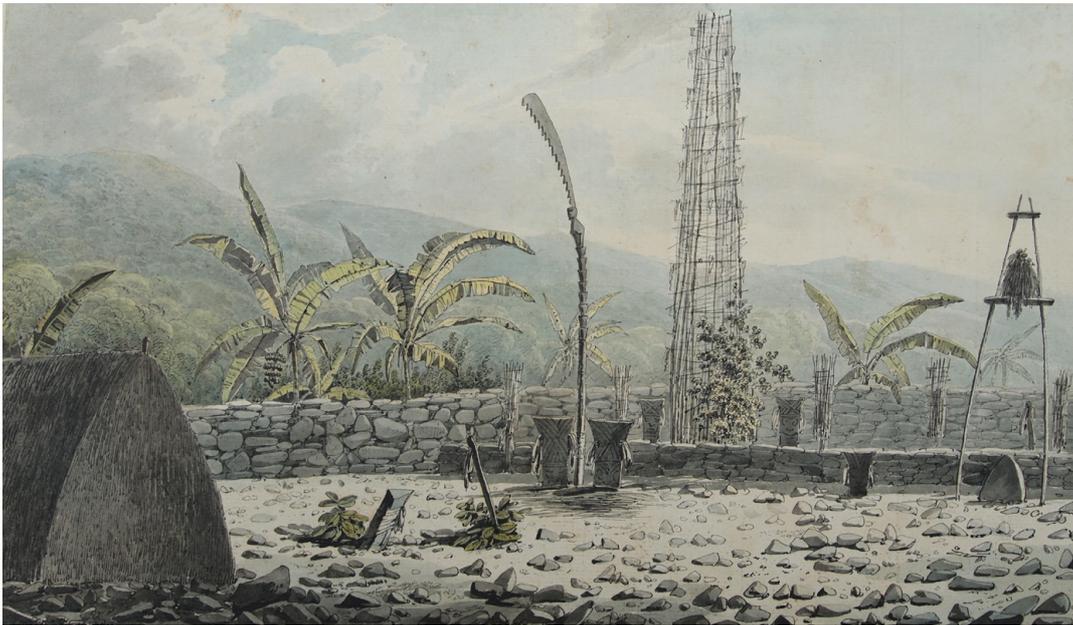


Figure 1 John Webber, *A Morai, in Atooi*, 1781.en, wash and watercolour, 22.3 × 37.6 cm. Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Dixson Library, DL PXX2.

miscommunication and misrecognition. To present the argument, however, that Webber's images merely serve to perpetuate these misunderstandings would be to exclude the opportunities his work offers, not least in terms of reevaluating those European discourses on art to which Thomas alludes.

Within the 'Atlas', the empty meeting ground of *A Morai at Atooi* takes on a dramatic character distinct from that of the text. In contrast to the first two voyage accounts, where the engravings intersect with the text, this separate bound volume of prints allowed the viewer to move from one image to the next as a visual narrative unfolded. As Lord Hardwicke wrote in a letter to the book's editor, John Douglas, 'The Drawings will explain some Things better than Description.'¹⁵ Certainly, the drawings tell a *different* story to that presented in the written account, as is evidenced by the fact that the images, in their numbered sequence, do not correspond with the chronological order of the text. Matching the push and pull on the viewer's emotions, the way in which the images follow and depart from the text lends them an oneiric quality, a sense of being adrift. Furthermore, the more they connect to one another, the less they seem to connect to what they describe, not simply the text itself, but beyond that, the reality of each discrete encounter. This sense of detachment from reality, Jonathan Lamb argues, is a feature that characterises

all South Sea voyage narratives of the eighteenth century. Lamb draws a link with this phenomenon to contemporary accounts on scurvy, a disease that brings about in the sufferer a state of mind which Thomas Trotter, writing in 1792, described as ‘scorbutic Nostalgia,’ a pathological longing for the sight, smell, taste and touch of firm land.¹⁶ This phantasmagorical aspect of the engravings puts significant pressures on Smith’s concept of the ‘impartial spectator.’¹⁷ As the images unfold, oscillating between spectacles of death and assurances of pleasurable commerce, the sympathies of eighteenth-century viewers would be strained to such a point as to undermine whatever rationale was deployed to channel them.

Broadly speaking, systems of law and notions of government were being challenged from many quarters at this time. Cook departed on his last voyage eight days after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence (4 July 1776). It is noteworthy that the official account of that voyage was published on 4 June 1784, less than a month after the final ratification of the Treaty of Paris (12 May 1784), which concluded the American War of Independence. The selection of the images from a catalogue of 192 drawings was decided upon during a committee meeting held at the Admiralty in late 1780 or early 1781, at the height of the conflict.¹⁸ The committee was established by John Montagu, then First Lord of the Admiralty, and included, alongside Webber, Alexander Dalrymple and Joseph Banks.¹⁹ As the producer of the publication, it was Banks, in consultation with Webber, who most likely decided on the final sequence.²⁰ The cost of the plates and the paper, which was borne by the Admiralty, came to £3596.0.1.²¹ A high run of 2,000 copies was printed in the first edition, each costing £3.5.0, the equivalent to about four months wages for a farm labourer.²² Despite the cost, copies sold rapidly, with profits recorded in 1795 ‘to the amount of £3862.9.4.’²³ Given the political crisis over the loss of the Thirteen Colonies, it seems reasonable to conclude that what drove this expensive publishing endeavour was the need to process this loss, whilst also manufacturing assent for a new vision of empire.²⁴ The role that Webber’s illustrations of Cook’s voyage played in imagining this transitional moment is of real importance, not least because the ‘Atlas’ was effectively edited by some of the most influential figures in Britain at the time, including the man responsible for the administration of the Navy during the American War. Following Christopher Pinney’s insistence on the primacy of visuality – of the ‘struggles occurring at the level of the visual’ – in determining

history, here I would argue that events respond to images, rather than vice versa.²⁵ In this case, Webber's 'Atlas', rarely viewed as a singular work of art, articulates not a singular or prescribed vision of the world, neither Webber's nor Cook's, but a relentlessly discursive, figural and mimetic one, which, in its improvisatory constructions, helped to formulate the anxieties and ambitions of a country facing a particularly critical moment in its history.

Questioning Empire

The secret instructions Cook was given for his first voyage, 'to take possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain' also held true for the third voyage.²⁶ Whatever this may suggest, however, late eighteenth-century ideas of 'empire' were highly precarious.²⁷ Significantly, the year 1776, aside from the outset of war, also saw the publication of Edmund Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which the author details the movement of imperial power away from the city, resulting in the decline of both.²⁸ Tacitus' phrase *alibi quam Romae* [elsewhere than at Rome] was one that would have been particularly pertinent in the 1770s as the colonies of European powers were becoming, to quote Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, also published in 1776, 'less in the view and less in the power of their mother country.'²⁹ Like sympathy, therefore, the strength of empires weakens with distance. In a letter of 1779, Gibbon himself draws the parallel: '*la decadence de Deux Empires, le Romain et le Britannique, s'avancent [sic] à pas égaux*' [the decadence of the two empires, the Roman and the British, advance at equal pace].³⁰ Despite the parallels between these two empires, their knowledge of the differences between Rome, 'an ancient land empire of appropriation' and Britain 'a modern maritime empire of commerce,' meant that for Gibbon and Smith the loss of America, however politically devastating, would not signal the demise of Britain's global success.³¹

The cause of the war was framed in economics for Smith who largely accounts for it in terms of the financial promise that the monopoly of the commerce of America represented, what he described as 'the dazzling splendor of the object,' an expression that highlights both the scopic regimes that empires of commerce are built upon and the illusory qualities of them.³² America was too rich and fertile to avoid the covetous gaze of commercial monopolism. The image that precedes *A Morai in Atooi* in the 'Atlas,' *A View of Huahine* (1781, figure 2) offers a panoramic view of another rich



Figure 2 John Webber, *A View of the Harbour in Huahine*, 1781.en, wash and watercolour, 39.4 × 64.1 cm, signed and dated 'J. Webber del 1778' (l.r.). Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Dixson Library, DL PXX2.

and fertile land, Fare in the Society Islands. Johann Reinhold Forster, the naturalist who accompanied Cook on his second voyage, regarded the inhabitants of the Society Islands, such as Huahine, as the most 'polished and civilized' among Pacific Islanders.³³ This judgement was founded both on his appreciation of the 'beauty' of the people, and on the strength of their commercial infrastructure. The emphasis on developing international trading opportunities rather than on colonial expansion, with all its associations of conquest and exploitation, was crucial in providing the rationale for Cook's voyages. Despite anxieties about the perils of luxury that commerce presented, its social benefits were widely promoted in the eighteenth century, and the encouragement of trade was viewed as instrumental in the 'progress of societies.'³⁴ As Adam Ferguson states: 'The enjoyment of peace, and the prospect of being able to exchange one commodity for another, turns, by degrees, the hunter and the warrior into a tradesman and a merchant.'³⁵ The left to right span of Webber's composition suggests a progressive movement, together with a spatial expansion, from the earthbound to the seaborne, from the local to the global. The Union Jack on the *Resolution* pictured in the bay further suggests a flow of trade radiating outwards, under British control,

while the manner in which the ships lead us out of the frame points to the world outside, visually expressing a shift in commercial transactions to an ‘outsider-dominated hierarchy.’³⁶

In its promotion of trade as a civilising force, such a reading of the image does lend itself to Smith’s notion of the ‘impartial spectator,’ which, while operating internally to control our selfish passions, works also externally, encouraging the subordination of local interests to global trade, the result of which would serve to maintain international peace.³⁷ It is this twofold socialising aspect of the ‘impartial spectator’ that connects Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with *The Wealth of Nations*. As Forman-Barzilai argues, “‘sympathy followed money’ for Smith in the society of nations.”³⁸ However, one should avoid too facile a connection between Smith’s concept of impartiality and global commerce. It is all too easy to rationalise greed and exploitation, as was made evident in the spurious reasons given for chasing the dazzling prospect of a monopoly of trade with America. If British viewers were entranced by the ‘dazzling splendour’ of Webber’s Huahine, the image that follows, *A Morai at Atooi*, with its associations with death and human sacrifice provides a reminder that for Europeans in Polynesia, sympathy can very rapidly shift to its opposite or, as I will argue, perhaps even contains its opposite.

The precarious affective economy that Webber’s *A View of Huahine* partakes in, rather than inspiring impartiality might more appropriately be linked to Smith’s ‘natural misrepresentations of self-love.’ A stronger case for the image of the ‘impartial spectator’ could therefore be made for that of the *marai* that follows it which functions as a regulatory device to temper the viewer’s imaginary self-identification with the utopian space of Huahine. Here it may be useful to bring to bear Jonathan Crary’s distinction between the terms ‘spectator’ and ‘observer’. For Crary, the first denotes ‘one who is a passive onlooker at a spectacle,’ the second, taken from the Latin, *observare*, meaning ‘to conform one’s actions, to comply,’ implies the observation of ‘rules, codes, regulations and practices.’³⁹ Smith’s ‘impartial spectator’ seems to operate in conjunction with both forms of looking, being in one sense removed from the action, which it passively spectates and, at the other, using that spectacle as a means of self-regulation. The visual mechanics of the ‘Atlas,’ it could be argued, works in similar ways; on one level the images respond to the viewer’s need to see, or spectate, what the text describes, while on another, in their content and their sequencing, they impose observation of

certain codes and regulations that in turn impact upon the viewer's own habits of visual consumption. Drawing connections with Michel Foucault's Panopticism, Forman-Barzilai describes this as the "disciplinary" stage of Smith's 'sympathy dynamic.'⁴⁰ It is an association that would seem to legitimise the question as to whether there is an implicit disciplinary violence in the gaze of the 'impartial spectator' and whether, in the visual mechanics of the 'Atlas,' there is not an emergent colonial discourse in which 'sympathy' may be defined as narcissistic self-identification, which is neither mastered nor disciplined by, but inextricably conjoined with feelings, both inward and outward reaching, of suspicion, fear and aggressivity.⁴¹

Sympathy for the Dead

Of all disciplinary spectacles, the image of death is for Smith the most powerful and important, engendering a fear which restrains us from injustice and which 'guards and protects the society.'⁴² It is through the mirror of others, the dead, as well as the living, that we learn to conform to social norms. Not only do we mirror others, and watch as others mirror us, we turn this constant surveillance onto ourselves.

According to Alexander Broadie, a key distinction between Hume's and Smith's understanding of sympathy is that while both use the term to refer to sympathetic feeling, as well as the mechanism by which that feeling is generated, Smith goes on to stress the importance of knowing the situation of the agent with whom the spectator sympathises.⁴³ For Smith, knowledge of the situation plays a leading role in the spectator's sympathetic reaction, while the agent's own feelings often play a correspondingly insignificant role and in the case of a man who is dead, none at all.⁴⁴ Smith's assertion that '[w]e sympathize even with the dead' goes directly against Hume for whom the progress of sympathy is 'from the spectator's impression to an idea of the agent's passion, and thence to that same passion in the spectator.'⁴⁵ Humean sympathy, therefore, is essentially a principle of communication.⁴⁶ For Smith it is more intimately connected with the imagined self, for sympathy involves imagining ourselves not simply being in the agent's situation, but being the agent in the situation: 'we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him.'⁴⁷ In this respect, according to Jean-Pierre Dupuy, the 'Smithian self is fundamentally mimetic, always ready to lose itself in the many mirrors held forth by others.'⁴⁸



Figure 3 John Webber, *A Human Sacrifice, in a Morai in Otaheite*, 1781.en, wash and watercolour, 24.7 × 46.7 cm, unsigned. Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Dixson Library, DL PXX2.

The possibility of sympathising with the dead is conveyed with graphic immediacy in Webber's *A Human Sacrifice at Otaheite* (1781, figure 3). Here I think it is worth pausing a moment to consider the Polynesian concept of *mana*, one not entirely distinct from Smith's notion of sympathy. Various translations as 'potency,' 'efficacy' 'luck' and 'success,' *mana* is transferred from the gods to man through ritual actions, such as sacrifice, which serve to 'increase and fully actualize it.'⁴⁹ The human sacrifice, instigated by the Tahitian chieftain, Tu, in this instance is taking place on the eve of battle to ensure the island's military success against its neighbour, Moorea. Importantly, the transference of *mana* can *only* occur through man's recognition of the god; such ritual actions as sacrifice therefore effectively bring the god into existence; as evidence of this, Valerio Valeri notes how, in reference to an Hawaiian king, 'the supreme sacrificer,' a traditional chant declared: '*ola ia kini akua ia 'oe* [you give life to a multitude of gods].'⁵⁰ It is not only the king who gives life to gods. The power to invoke *mana* extends throughout the social body, as ultimately it depends, according to Valeri, on 'feelings and dispositions (such as sympathy) that are eminently connected with "fellowship."⁵¹ There is no denying the strength of fellowship among the Tahitians in Webber's painting, due in part to the contrast established by the

depiction of the Europeans, who, whilst standing in close physical proximity, exhibit a range of individual responses to the scene.

The image shows the victim lying in the centre of a tripartite composition, with drummers and worshippers to the left and the European spectators, together with Tu, who stands with his arm raised, to the right. The separation of these figures from the focus of the action is handled with some subtlety, the rod to which the victim is tied, for example, overlaps with the figural group on the left, while a noticeable gap remains between the victim and the right-hand group. There is also that strong shadow cast in the corner where a further sense of separation is conveyed by the figure with his back to us (figure 4). The absence of a sword strap and the style of wig would lead one



Figure 4 John Webber, Detail of *A Human Sacrifice, in a Morai in Otaheite*, 1781. Pen, wash and watercolour, 24.7 × 46.7 cm, unsigned. Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Dixson Library, DL PXX2.

to believe that it is Webber himself. Curiously, he has chosen not to face the viewer. Perhaps he is engaged in drawing. His back is cut crisply with a shadow, paralleling the victim whose body is similarly bisected. The shadow also suggests a divided self. Sympathetically, it seems, a part of Webber at least has joined the victim, sharing in what Smith describes as the misery of the dead ‘deprived of the light of the sun . . . shut out from life and conversation.’⁵² This sense of duality in the figure is compounded by the paradox of the eye-witness witnessing himself, an act of self-othering that reminds one of what Broadie calls ‘the strangeness of Smith’s concept of sympathy.’⁵³

Bernard Smith, who accounted the image ‘one of the best-known illustrations of the [nineteenth] century,’ describes how missionary societies were drawn to what they perceived as its presentation of ‘the unredeemed native.’⁵⁴ In terms of exploring competing economies of sympathy, the image is certainly useful in outlining specific theological differences between the Tahitians and the Europeans, particularly around the notion of *mana* and soul. Unlike the ‘God within’ tradition of Protestant theology that Smith draws on in articulating his own understanding of sympathy, and which Webber’s prayer-like draughtsman’s pose would appear to endorse, *mana* can only be actualised through a collective recognition of the ‘god without’ and as such of the gods’ existential dependency on man.⁵⁵ This distinction later became a ground of contention that European missionaries in Polynesia would have to address. In doing so, as Sujit Sivasundaram argues, they ‘entered dangerous epistemological territory,’ a territory into which, as we shall see, Webber’s own mimetic practices also strayed.⁵⁶

Radical bodies

Amidst the wealth of visual display it presents us, the landscapes, peoples and customs, the spectre of death is felt in all the illustrations of the ‘Atlas’. Aside from the death of Cook and the expedition’s failure to discover the Northern Passage, utopian imaginings of the Pacific, such as one finds in previous accounts of Cook’s voyages, could no longer keep at bay the traumatic events that were taking place in the Atlantic, the site of war and slavery, nor the powerful voices of opposition they provoked. In David Erdman’s biography *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, the spirit of rebellion that crosses the Atlantic into Britain in the late 1770s forms the primary source of inspiration for young radicals like Blake.

Erdman's analysis of *The Dance of Albion* (1794–1796, figure 5) traces the image to the year 1780 when Blake drew a picture 'transforming a textbook diagram of the proportions of the human figure into a terrific social utterance;' a reading supported by the inscription which Blake added to the image around 1800:

Albion rose from where he labourd at the Mill with Slaves
Giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death.⁵⁷

Here, Erdman argues, one man's rhetoric is turned against another. Edmund Burke's 'death-dance of democratic revolution' that for him had come close to destroying the country in the early 1780s, is transformed by Blake into Albion's 'dance of Eternal Death,' in which Albion, or as Erdman reads the figure, the people of England, rise up to demonstrate their independence in an act of 'apocalyptic self-sacrifice.'⁵⁸

Contemporaneous with Blake's original drawing is Webber's 1781 *A Man of Hawaii, dancing*, (figure 6) which Blake may well have seen in the summer of that year. In September, Blake produced a vignette, one of a pair of engravings after Thomas Stothard's paintings of scenes from Smollett's *Sir Launcelot Greaves*; the other being produced by Charles Grignion, the same engraver who worked on Webber's dancing figure.⁵⁹ According to Banks' papers, Webber's original drawing was in Grignion's possession from June 20th 1781 to May 2nd 1782.⁶⁰ Given the two would have had to work closely together to ensure continuity in their designs, it is tempting to suppose that Blake visited Grignion's studio and saw the image there. If not, he was certainly familiar with the 'Atlas' when it was published. In 1786 he reworked five images from it for Hervey's *New System of Geography*.⁶¹

As with Blake's Albion, the pose of *A Man of Hawaii, dancing* does not conform to models of sensibility or notions of classical restraint. Naked save for a *koteka*, or penis gourd, a necklace and shell ornaments around his ankles, the body is marked with tattoos, while one hand holds an elaborate gourd rattle or *uli'uli*. The text refers to the instrument dismissively as 'not produc[ing] a melody exceeding that of a child's rattle.'⁶² In the plate the *uli'uli* is more impressive, its circular form echoed by the curve of the dancer's silhouette. The bowl of the rattle is barely visible, largely we see it head on, the effect being to create an optical play of form in which the circle creates



Figure 5 William Blake, *Albion Rose*, 1794-6. Colour printed etching with hand-drawn additions in ink and watercolour in *A Large Book of Designs*, 27.2 × 20 cm. Courtesy of the British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 6 John Webber, *Portrait of Hawaii, Dancing*, 1781. Watercolour and wash, 24.1 × 17.8 cm, unsigned. Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Dixson Library, DL PXX2.

a frame within the image. Like an enormous eye that meets and challenges the viewer's gaze, its circular form functions as though in opposition to the illusionism of the highly-modelled figure and setting. As with the patterns of his tattoos, there is an awareness that this shape too carries meaning. What it is, however, remains a mystery. Far from Cook's 'child's rattle,' Webber presents the object as an apotropaic form that at once confuses the gaze and renders the dynamism of the figure more unsettling.

The viewer, cognisant of the manner of Cook's demise, is presented with the possibility of a death-dance of another sort than either democratic reform or apocalyptic self-sacrifice: it was at the hands of such a man as this that Cook lost his life and at the hands of such a man, perhaps, as Captain King relates in the official account, 'the body had been cut to pieces.'⁶³ The positioning of the figure in the sequence of images related to the second, fatal visit to the Hawaiian Islands would surely have generated these associations. In the extraordinary omission of any explicit visual reference to Cook's death in the 'Atlas', the sympathies of the eighteenth-century viewer are reframed and redirected, compelling questions, such as: Who is this dancing man? What role if any did he have in the death of Cook? What is the significance of his dance? Is it meant to welcome or to repel us? Rather than the conflict between the death-in-life of slavery and the life-in-death of liberty that one finds in Blake's figure, in Webber's the conflict lies between what belongs to the knowable and what to the imaginary.⁶⁴ While ostensibly the image presented its viewers with visual information that enhanced their knowledge of what the text described, ultimately it was, to quote Homi K. Bhabha, 'forms of narcissistic and aggressive identification available to the Imaginary' that an image such as *A Man of Hawaii, dancing* evoked. In which case, the carefully articulated details of Webber's image merely provided an alibi for the ultimate desideratum, the play of meaning provoked by 'emblems, shows and performances' rather than fact-based discoveries.⁶⁵

To sympathise either with Cook at the moment of his death or the dancer whose dance becomes emblematic of that death, to 'enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him' seems impossible without entering into the bodies of both. As one object of desire mirrors the other and slides into its subjecthood, the viewer experiences 'the substitution and fixation that is fetishism' but not without a trace of loss, not unlike the loss of that very impartiality for which Cook was so

unjustly lauded.⁶⁶ According to Lamb, Cook gave himself up to the ‘shows and performances’ that he took such pleasure in describing, a proposition supported by his crew members who talked of the rages Cook would fly into towards the end of his life. James Trevenen, an able seaman on the *Resolution*, called them Cook’s *heiva*, ‘the name of the dances of the Southern Islanders, which bore so great a resemblance to the violent passion, into which he often threw himself upon the slightest occasion.’⁶⁷ As this reading of the image suggests, such forms of mimetic identification in which the viewers themselves become complicit served to radically destabilize that quasi-theological, transcendent entity, the ‘impartial spectator’ that Adam Smith had wrestled so hard to define in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.⁶⁸

The Death of Cook

In late eighteenth-century Britain, to sympathise, it seems, required a degree of sacrifice, be it the apocalyptic self-annihilation of Blake’s Albion, Smith’s recognition of ‘the real littleness of ourselves’ or the self-denial of Webber’s putative self-portrait. While, as I hope to have demonstrated here, the ‘Atlas,’ its images and the sequence in which they are presented, intersect in interesting ways with Smith’s and other contemporary notions of sympathy; these moments of intersection are, however, problematic. Comparing *The Dance of Albion* with *A Man of Hawaii*, *dancing* reveals an important point of divergence: unlike Blake’s Albion, in the ‘Atlas’ we are left to ask whether the destruction of the body really does bring with it the destruction of ignorance. Are the spectacles of death we experience in the ‘Atlas’ compensated for by a greater clarity of vision or purpose? What distinguishes the economics of Webber’s ‘Atlas’ from other visual accounts of the South Seas is the authority of Cook’s death, an authority from which those involved in its production borrowed so liberally.⁶⁹ Its value, it seems, was, in the name of sympathy, to give licence to reinscribe, to reorder and to reorientate events, as well as people and places. From this perspective, and in ways not dissimilar to how the Tahitian human sacrifice increases and actualises the *mana* of the god, the imago of Cook’s death is inextricably linked with a new and far from glorious vision of empire. I use the term imago and not image, as in the first edition of the ‘Atlas’ no direct visual reference is made to that death. At some point in 1783, Webber was asked by the Admiralty to complete a plate, ‘representing the DEATH OF CAPTAIN COOK,’ which he did in



Figure 7 Figures by Francesco Bartolozzi, landscape by William Byrne (after John Webber) *The Death of Captain Cook*, 1785. Copper-plate engraving, 29.5 × 40.5 cm, plate 79 (the number is handwritten). From James Cook and James King, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (London, 1785). Courtesy of the British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum.

January 1784 (figure 7). The plate was not, however, sent to the printers with the others in May of that year; its inclusion in the ‘Atlas’ would have to wait for the 1785 edition.⁷⁰ This omission invites the viewer to sympathise with the dead Cook in oblique and ultimately unsatisfactory ways, rummaging for him in the subtext of an abundance of confusing and contradictory visual material. In the process, the death that is hidden from view becomes more than merely that of the Captain but rather emblematic of what Gibbon might term a ‘slow and secret poison’ that leaks from the very heart of this new vision, casting doubt on the validity of such notions as centre and empire and even claims for the soul. ‘The man within’ was lost to Oceania and for a few brief years at least European sympathies mercifully turned away from the South Seas.

Notes

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