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“Too many meanings”: reading “Piro designs”

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In this piece, we are looking at what we consider some of the most striking and inspiring contributions that Pete made as an anthropologist, engaging with problems from an ethnographic perspective in the distinctive and incisive way that anybody familiar with his work would instantly recognize. Some of the questions he grapples with, and which we want to further reflect on here, are: How does meaning come to reside in a specific design system? How is such a system profoundly interrelated with the lived experiences that constitute people’s subjectivity? How can we make sense of actions and visual forms that, despite seeming familiar, demand an attention to and a recognition of experiences and interpretations different from our own? These questions are elegantly formulated and dealt with in “Piro designs: painting as meaningful action in an Amazonian lived world” (1999), an article that brings together and prefigures many of the strands of Pete’s work.

The themes running through “Piro designs” also interweave with our respective areas of research and interest. Reflecting on them brings us back to some of the core issues that have been preoccupying and stimulating us for some time. For Margherita Margiotti, these issues include questions pertaining to kinship, sociality, and the creation of persons, which she first explored through her ethnographic fieldwork among Guna people in the San Blas Archipelago of Panama (Guna Yala), and later through engagement with the novel perspectives she gained from her subsequent training in psychoanalysis. Paolo Fortis, who has also conducted fieldwork with Guna people, has studied their visual and material world in relation to cosmology, history, and time. Pete’s work has influenced much of our thinking in relation to Guna ethnography. He was not only our PhD supervisor, but also remained a key interlocutor and friend through the years. We learned as much from his writing as from the many conversations we had with him each time we visited his house in Dundee or he visited ours in St Andrews, Bristol, and then Durham.

Here, what we want to briefly reflect on is the important contribution that he made to the understanding of how meaning is created and transmitted through everyday acts that transcend verbal communication. In looking at designs as the manifestation of human embodied skills, and at how meanings come to reside in visual forms via the day-to-day embodied experience of women and men relating to each other, what we are really looking at is the human capacity for creating shared meanings out of core biographical experiences and relations. As Gell argues at the beginning of *Art and Agency*:

Anthropology differs from [sociology and social psychology] in providing a particular *depth of focus*, which perhaps one could best describe as ‘biographical’, that is, the view taken by anthropology of social agents to replicate the time perspective of these agents on themselves. (1998: 10)

We suggest that Pete’s focus on the action of “painting with design” among Yine women can be further developed into an attention to the biographical relations that are rendered

meaningful and even shaped by such actions as creating designs and other objects. It is specific actions and the attention they demand from both those who carry them out and those at the receiving end that render designs and other visual forms meaningful. Such actions are therefore key to discerning the “immanence of social relations in the index,” as Küchler and Carroll have subsequently elaborated (2021: 222). In what follows, we reflect on these issues, taking into account the role of visual forms in giving shape to and navigating biographical time among Guna people and the question of symbol formation in the development of the subject and of people’s relations with each other.

Paolo Fortis: a personal note on the meaningfulness of a relation

In the opening lines of “Piro designs,” Pete asks:

What questions can be asked of a visual aesthetic system? What sorts of meanings can such a system generate, and how does it do so? How can such a system come to be experienced as both a necessary and an important feature of a given human lived world? (Gow, 1999: 229)

The power of the ethnographic analysis that follows, which addresses these questions, resides in pointing to an alternative to modernist questions around authorship, referential meaning, and lifelikeness. This analysis follows the path of Yine categories of embodied skills acquired and manifested throughout the life course of women. At the time I first read “Piro designs,” I was not familiar with the authors who had influenced Pete’s work. The term “lived world” itself was new to me, and little did I know how far the concept would accompany my anthropological and ethnographic explorations. Soon after reading the article, I started looking for the other works Pete had written on art. I unsuccessfully tried to get hold of a copy of “Visual compulsion” (1989), which I was only able to read in 2005 when I moved to St Andrews to write a PhD dissertation under Pete’s and Joanna Overing’s supervision.

I recall vividly how, during one of the first supervisions, I told Pete of a fateful conversation I had at the start of my fieldwork with Héctor Garcia, a Guna chief in the village of Ogobsuggun. In response to my pressing questions regarding the meaning of designs that Guna women make on their blouses, Héctor picked up a wooden carved figurine from a basket lying at his feet and switched the topic of the conversation to that ritual artefact. Bemused and intrigued by the sudden change of topic, I became interested in these artefacts and, relieved that a new path of research had opened after my initial frustrations, I decided to refocus my fieldwork. The sudden change of topic from women’s designs to men’s woodcarving, which had remained unprocessed in my memory, did not escape Pete’s attention. After hearing about my conversation with Héctor, he stood up in excitement and started looking for a copy of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) in his office. He searched for the chapter on the Caduveo and told me to read it (quickly adding that the whole book would be better), followed by his “Visual compulsion,” “Could Sangama read?” (1990), and “Piro designs,” in that order. He concluded the supervision visibly animated, exclaiming, “I’m happy! I’m happy!”

As I explain below, Pete’s work takes Lévi-Strauss’ reflections on aesthetics into a new direction, applying a “biographical depth of focus” to Yine ethnography. Lévi-Strauss had developed a crucial insight of Boas on the interconnectedness of graphic and plastic art in the art of the Native Peoples from the Northwest Coast of America, showing that Caduveo women’s face designs are key to their concept of personhood. Building on Amazonian theories of corporeality, Pete subsequently showed in “Visual compulsion” that the complex design systems of some Western Amazonian peoples, such as Yine, Shipibo, and Conibo, present a wider socio-historical development of the relation between what in Western parlance are called “geometric” and “figurative” designs. These are notably manifested in Amazonia in body, clothing, or pottery decorations and hallucinatory visions. It is by studying the relation between

these different visual forms and the different media in which they appear that we are led to consider the pivotal role of the human body in the ongoing constitution of kinship relations. By the same token, as Pete subsequently argued in “Could Sangama read?,” the Yine graphic design system allows for the interpretation of new forms such as white people’s writing. This allowed Sangama, a Yine shaman living at the beginning of the twentieth century, to claim that he knew how to read alphabetic writing. The geometric patterns at the onset of shamanic visions that subsequently give way to the images of spirits were thus equated to writing as the preferred medium for the transmission of knowledge in European tradition. What Pete shows is that the Yine visual system should not be seen as a system for the transmission of meaning, but rather a system generative of meaning. This point is further developed in “Piro designs,” where the historical and biographic dimensions of meaning making through the graphic system are brought together and fleshed out through the analysis of the key life stages of Yine women.

There was much to that early conversation with Pete that took time for me to process. There is much to “Piro designs” in terms of ethnographic and anthropological insights that unfolds at many levels. The liveliness of Pete’s analysis, there and in the rest of his work, is both theoretical and ethnographic; its power resides in the active engagement with the Yine people’s lived experience from a profoundly human perspective. This perspective is not, indeed cannot be, free from the painful realization of the transience of human experience. This realization traverses much of Pete’s writings, whether it is about art, kinship, myth, or history, injecting it with profound insightfulness. His writing grapples vividly and masterfully with the pain and joy of everyday experience, bringing them to bear with a tight anthropological focus. It is this combination of humanity, insightfulness, and scholarly creativity, together with a distinctive erudition and curiosity for all things human, that has made, and continues to make, Pete’s work an ongoing inspiration, albeit not free from the pain caused by his untimely death.

Héctor’s shift of topic from designs to wooden figures was, I came to realize, his way to point me in the direction of men’s skilled experience of dealing with cosmological alterity responsible for illness, death, and healing. While sewing designs on women’s blouses and carving wooden figures represent gender-specific forms of action, the embodied experiences that both objects elaborate (birth, illness, and death) and the meanings they generate are shared by all. The continuity between what, from the perspective of Western aesthetics, are discrete areas of artistic activity points, on one hand, to the structural relations between Guna actions of sewing designs and carving wooden figures, and, on the other, to the “quintessential meaningfulness” of such actions.

On the relation between designs and plastic forms, in some way parallel to that between drawing and painting in Western tradition, Pete followed Lévi-Strauss’ insight on Caduveo face designs and looked at it through the historical perspective of Yine women’s lived experience. The “split” of Lévi-Strauss’ “split representations” (1963) acquires further ethnographic meaning through the unfolding of a woman’s biography. Lévi-Strauss’ intuition on the oppositional relations between two-dimensional graphic and three-dimensional plastic forms (observed in decorated and carved objects such as totem poles, clothing, and human bodies) is turned from a flat temporal representation of lived experience (notwithstanding its comparative historical dimension) into a representation in the round, acquiring its spacetime depth following the flow of designs along Yine women’s biographies. This is an example of how historical meaning-making processes are brought to bear upon lived experience in Pete’s work. This integration is possible through his use of the category of “meaningfulness,” instead of “meaning,” developed in Nancy Munn’s analysis of the Walbiri graphic system as a recursive model for studying “art as a category for experience” (1973). In her study, Munn shows how meaning does not preexist the making of graphic forms, but instead meaningfulness emerges through the embeddedness of graphic signs in everyday actions and processes, which are in

turn informed by Dreamtime stories. In the acknowledgments at the end of his article, Pete thanks Munn for sending him a “list of astute ethnographic questions,” which he brought with him on a visit to the Bajo Urubamba in 1988 when he set out to study Yine designs. He had always kept that list, which he often mentioned, sometimes promising to give me a copy, which he eventually never did.

Munn’s model places art at the center of meaning-making processes in Walbiri lived experience. Walbiri women’s sand drawings recursively give meaning to and are rendered meaningful by everyday experiences. Acts of drawing graphs with one’s fingers in the sand accompany dream stories that are experienced as deeply intimate by women, while also being informed by Dreamtime stories. Sand drawings and other kinds of designs render the multiplicity of meanings of lived experiences meaningful intersubjectively, precisely because they mediate between the personal bodily experiences of Walbiri women. Internal, personal experience is rendered meaningful, that is, intersubjectively available, by means of designs. Drawing on Munn’s model, Pete shows that Yine “painting with design” is a meaningful action that accompanies the development of young girls into adult women. Learning to “paint with design” is the expression of a woman’s path toward becoming a “real Yine woman,” who, in her old age, will be able to render a younger woman beautiful as the last achievement before her own death. Ultimately, “painting with design” is a meaningful action that is pivotal in the ongoing reproduction of kinship constituted by reciprocal acts of feeding and demanding to be fed across generations.

Piro [Yine] design is beautiful because it is difficult to do, and it is difficult to do because it takes a lifetime to master. It renders the social productivity of a woman's life as the visual experience of beauty on another person. (Gow, 1999: 230)

We might ask, then, what is the agency of designs in shaping Yine women’s biographies? This is a question I ask through the language used by Alfred Gell, with whom Pete was also in dialogue at the time of writing “Piro designs.” In a lived world where visual meaning is intrinsic to the production of sociality and of persons, the generativity of designs takes us necessarily beyond the more restrictive visual experience of Western modern art. Taking on board both Pete’s and Gell’s insights, I argue that designs, as the Guna case illustrates, are indexical of human praxis (Fortis, 2010). From childbirth onward, they accompany and contribute to the making of new persons. “Amniotic designs” accompany the emergence of a new human being through the establishment of visual communication with adult human beings. Amniotic designs are indexes of non-human prototypical agency. By the same token, they are pivotal in the kind of communication that enables the establishment of proper human relations between adult kinspeople and newborns, and, ultimately, the constitution of human social praxis. The designs made by Guna women on their blouses are one of the multiple manifestations of human praxis that is indexical and productive of social life. The transformations operated during the making of designs and carved objects are indexical of the continuity of the social body, and at the same time contribute to its reproduction.

Pete thus found the meaningfulness of designs in the biographies of Yine women, injecting a temporal dynamism into the static visual system depicted by Lévi-Strauss based on his observation of Caduveo face painting. The multiple instantiations of designs and other transformative processes in Guna lived experience not only acquire their meaningfulness through the unfolding of individual biographies, but also contribute to shaping these biographies. Visual systems, seen through this model, are thus both capable of creating meaning out of experience and of creating the new kinds of meaning that are constantly generative of novel social experiences. The meaningfulness of designs emerging from the layering of fabric of Guna women’s blouses is not only unfolding from their biographies, but is also generative of processes that shape women’s biographies. Making designs and carving wooden figures are

thus actions that take a distinctively human temporal dimension. They are embodied actions that translate relations with non-humans and the dead. By the same token, they are actions that generate meaning in relation to the prototypical embodied action, that of making new human beings. This relation between images and artefacts and prototypical action, central to the continuity of society in time, is what makes art-making processes a privileged perspective from which to look at social change from within, from the perspective of the people living such change, and who often represent it as continuity. Images change while retaining a fundamental link to their prototype, thus allowing society to endure the loss of individual members. A dialogue with such images is therefore in some way like a dialogue with a departed friend. Painful as it is, a dialogue with Pete continues.

Margherita Margiotti: a comment on the question of “too many meanings”

In the conclusion of “Piro designs,” Pete touches on a recurrent problem of his ethnographic writings. In his thinking about Yine designs in relation to the extremely diversified visual forms in Aboriginal Australia, Melanesia, or Europe, Pete asks the following question: “how is it that a visual art form can have ‘too many meanings?’” (1999: 243). This is an old problem for anthropologists. It concerns the “limitless wealth of meaning [...] characteristic of human lived worlds” (ibid: 243) and the extreme variability of the ways human experience is made sense of while searching, as Leach puts it, for a way to make sense of the “seemingly chaotic permutations of empirical data” (1977: 372).

Pete approaches this problem in its relation to visual forms in a distinctively ethnographic way and using the notion of meaningfulness. His solution draws attention to the body as the central element of visual forms: the impression a body makes on the ground, the bones, the skin, and the body fluids. These body parts are metaphorized in the products of art forms, and then placed at the core of ritual actions “focused on the widest spatiotemporal frames of social processes: initiation rituals, mortuary rituals and so on, occasions when the cosmic order is directly linked to embodied experience in ritual action” (1999: 243). In other words, Pete suggests that very specific aspects of embodied experience (like footprints, bones, skin, or body fluids) are transformed into what Gell calls the “enchanted technologies of art” (1992). And, positioning the Western aestheticist discourse among other visual forms, Pete suggests that the centrality in Western art of seeing and making comes to have a third dimension, a “something else” that varies across cases. Pete argues that it is the connection between making, seeing, and “something else” that generates the “dense meaningfulness of specific lived worlds” (1999: 244).

As I am now actively engaged in clinical work, this argument invites me to open up the problem of the “dense meaningfulness of specific lived worlds” to a different perspective. Lying in the background of Pete’s argument, I see the very problem of symbol formation. This is implicit in his argument on visual forms, and perhaps from an anthropological perspective it is a truism to say that their symbolic capacity is the precondition of metaphorization. However, it is less so when viewed from the angle of psychoanalytical practice. Here, the problem of symbol formation is fundamental when considering cases of breakdown in the symbolic function, of not being able to form and use symbols, and also when considering the development of the capacity to form and use symbols.

This is a complicated problem, and I restrict myself here to briefly remarking that, early in her pioneering psychoanalytic work with children, Melanie Klein came to understand the capacity to form symbols as linked to the development of the ego (1975[1930]). In analyzing children who were inhibited in playing or showing limited interest in the world around them, Klein discovered that their play was a symbolic expression of unconscious phantasies and conflicts in relation to their mothers, fathers, their bodies, or part of their bodies. She talked

to children about their phantasies, about their libidinal or aggressive wishes with which the toys—equated in phantasy to their parents—were unconsciously invested.

Taking Klein's point further, for Hanna Segal, symbolism is always a three-term relationship (Quinodoz, 2008: 69) involving a symbol, an object, and an ego—with objects in psychoanalysis being the objects of one's love and hate, the "others" that the infant depends on and is related to. Segal describes the symbolic capacity as emerging during infant development, alongside the infant's progressive acquisition of a sense of separateness between the ego and these objects. With separateness, the symbol is formed and used to represent the object in its absence, indeed helping us to overcome its absence by means of an internal form of holding onto it, and hopefully onto its goodness. This is reminiscent of mourning as a gradual working-through of the object as forever gone, to then find it represented in meaningful ways in the depth of one's own mind and internal world. As Segal writes, "a symbol is like a precipitate of the mourning for the object" (1991: 40). In her view, forming symbols involves the capacity to feel the absence of the object and to represent it in symbol. More broadly, the capacity to form and use symbols comes out of the capacity to mourn for the object and come to terms with its loss, and this replicates the initial infantile experience of primal mourning for the loss of what was experienced as an object-merge with the ego in the first months of life.

I think Pete comes very close to this area of human experience in his later insightful and moving writings on kinship. In "Kinship as human consciousness" (1997), he states that kinship is, above all, a system of subjectivity, for the basic structures of human consciousness necessarily involve the consciousness of a self among others. In this article, Pete recovers Levi-Strauss' notion of human nature but steers it toward a more symbolic and phenomenological account of human experience, its intrinsic meaningfulness, taking on board the important criticisms that have been made of structural anthropology. These criticisms take issue with the practice of locating the structures of language/kinship/the unconscious outside the perceiving and acting subject, an example being the geometrical kinship diagrams—the "enchanted" artefacts of anthropological discourse—representing in idealized ways people's relationships with each other, which in reality are transient and easily damaged.

When Pete describes Yine kinship as emerging from inside the structure of human consciousness, I think his reasoning lies at the periphery of a complicated area of investigation into what exists before words in the relationship between infants and carers. Again, in line with Segal's suggestion (in Quinodoz, 2008), these first relations involve a subject, an object (in psychoanalytic terms), and the actions between them. I think these relations become meaningfully internalized to constitute the embodied structure of human consciousness as the basis for the recognition of oneself as necessarily separated from, but existing among and being depended on, others.

Conclusions

It might seem ironical to have written about nonverbal or preverbal communication in a piece dealing with Pete's legacy. Those who knew him, or even only met him briefly, know how much he was a man of words, of gripping stories and complex reasoning turned into elegant narratives. He possessed the art of storytelling and, as all great narrators, was an acute observer and, indeed, ethnographer. His empiricism was at the core of his writing, and none of his interpretations was too abstract. At the same time, much of what he said, or wrote, seemed also imbued with a particular quality of prescience, of grappling with the ineffability of human experience. The search for answers to the "limitless wealth of meanings" seems to have generated ever new questions, which Pete conveyed masterfully and often gifted to others. Much of this gifting went on during dinners, but also after seminars, or during walks.

Some questions stayed for a long time in our memory before eventually beginning to make sense, often in unexpected ways. After all, the sense of Pete’s “gifted questions” cannot be sought in their meaning, but perhaps can be found in the shared meaningfulness of the good conversations we had with him, which we fondly remember.

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