The Language of Flowers

Michael Taussig

Asked on a radio interview a couple of years back why he drew animals and not people, the great cartoonist Chuck Jones of Bugs Bunny and Road Runner fame replied: "It's easier to humanize animals than humanize humans." Recently the Colombian artist Juan Manuel Echavarría gave this a twist. Reacting against the stupendous violence in his country, he humanized flowers by photographing them like botanical specimens, replacing the stems, leaves, flowers, and berries with what look like human bones. He called this series of thirty-two black-and-white photographs The Flower Vase Cut, referring to the name of one of the mutilations practiced in the Colombian violencia of the 1940s and 1950s in which the amputated limbs were stuffed, so it is said, into the thorax via the neck of the decapitated corpse.

In cartoons we laugh at distortions of the body, suggesting just how close violence is to humor. Indeed the human face when crying can seem very close if not identical to that same face laughing. It is, moreover, almost trite to observe that great comedians and clowns bear the burden of great tragedy as well. As for the cartoon quality in violence, hearken to Michael Herr's reference to his experience in the Vietnam War; he goes to considerable effort to deny these two elements have anything in common: "No jive cartoon," he says, "where the characters get smacked around and electrocuted and dropped from heights, flattened out and frizzed back and broken like a dish, then up again and whole and back in the game."2

No jive cartoon—indeed! So why bother to raise that specter, only to

1. This is also how he begins his book, Chuck Jones, Chuck Amuck (New York, 1989), p. 13.
deny it? Why bother to come so close, only to draw back? Is it because the resemblance is too, too troubling, true but troubling, and by this maneuver we do precisely what is necessary, which is to catch a glimpse of the impossible unthinkable and then close it over again? Well, then, what is this impossible unthinkable that in equating war with a cartoon simultaneously heightens their stupendous difference?

Did I say *heighten*, as does Herr when he refers us to the cartoonish move of being dropped from heights, flattened out, “then up again and whole and back in the game”? What emotional register, what law of aesthetics and logic is being transgressed by this heightened drop and even steeper fall into . . . well, into what? Not redemption. That’s for sure. Back into war, that’s what—“up again and whole and back in the game.” Is this not also what occurs when Echavarria humanizes not animals but flowers, meticulously duplicating the exactness and whimsy of botanical drawings with his bleached-out photographs of human bones?

At one point in an interview, Echavarría says, “My purpose was to create something so beautiful that people would be attracted to it. The spectator would come near it, look at it, and then when he or she realizes that it is not a flower as it seemed, but actually a flower made of human bones—something must click in the head, or in the heart, I hope.”

I myself do not see it that way. The flowers are so obviously not flowers. Instead it is the very clumsiness, the deliberateness of the artifice of posing bones as flowers, that perturbs one—and this is of the same order of artifice that makes the mutilation of the *Corte del Florero* so powerful, too.

The flowers in Echavarría’s photographs have stems made of curving ribs or of the decayed long bones of arms. The petals are formed from what appear to be the human pelvis or spinal vertebrae. In some photographs, small bones like teeth or chips of bones lie to one side, thereby disturbing pretensions to symmetry or completeness. A vertebra hangs delicately off a rib, five of which are bunched together like plant stems emerging from a column of three vertebrae glued together, not as in the human spine, but separated from that, like a child’s building blocks, then stuck front to back, one on top of the other.

Lying on their bleached-out background, the flowers appear fragile, suspended in midair and ungrounded. They could be flying. The law of gravity no longer holds. There is a sense of a world on hold, a painful absence of sound. What we see is silence, the silence of something gone awfully wrong with the human world such that we are all, God included, holding our breath, which is probably what happens when you fall a long, long way.

To add to their strangeness, each photograph bears a title like the Latin names used in the plant illustrations of the famous botanical expedition to Colombia organized by the Spanish crown and led by José Celestino Mutis at the end of the eighteenth century. Echavarria is very conscious of this genealogy. In fact he sees his flowers as its latest expression. The difference is that Echavarria’s latinate names are hybrids suggesting the grotesque, one pelvic bone flower being named *Dracula Nosferatu*, while another flower made of a curved rib with a bunch of metacarpals at one end, suggestive of petals, is called *Dionaea Misera*. Although these names are in small, discreet letters, names are of consuming importance to this work, beginning with the name of the mutilation—*The Flower Vase Cut*. The name is crucial because on viewing the mutilated body without the name, I doubt whether an observer would get the point—as we say of a joke—without the name. All the observer would see would be a bloody morass of hacked-off limbs and a limbless trunk (figs. 1–2).

The mutilation would be incomplete, by which I mean it would lack the meaning that destroys meaning. I do not understand this. Perhaps I am not meant to. But what I do know is that what mutilation registers, what all mutilation registers, is this wave, this continuous wavelike motion of auto-sacrifice of meaning heightened then dissipated by the name in conjunction with the corpse as a work of art. I think it goes like this: that in attaching a commonplace name to a transgressive act the act is somehow completed, dignified with a meaning, we could say, only to shatter that name and that meaning. Herr’s story of the necklace made of amputated ears in Vietnam comes to mind. Love beads they were called.⁴

**Art Forms in Nature**

The striking plant illustrations of the eighteenth-century Mutis expedition, many in full color, are well known today both inside and outside of

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⁴ See Herr, *Dispatches*, p. 199.
Figure 1a–d. From Juan Manuel Echavarría, *Corte de Florero: Flower Vase Cut* (exhibition catalog, B & B Gallery, New York, N.Y.), pp. 5, 7, and 9.
Maxillaria Veras

Lam. 70

Figure 1b.
Dracula Nesfonda

Fig. 1c.
FIGURE 2a–c. Images from José Celestino Mutis’s expedition to Colombia.
Colombia, where they are now virtually icons of the nation, all the more powerful for being natural symbols. They stand for something at once modest and sublime, the humble plant on the one hand, the greatness that is the nation, on the other. They capture the wonder the New World had for the savants of Europe as a truly new world in which scientific curiosity and conquest existed side by side. How much of their beauty is due to this conflation?

Mutis provokes another question as well: Is there an art in nature as well as an art of nature? This is the same question implicit in Ernst Haeckel’s 1904 Art Forms in Nature as well as in the plant photography of a celebrated modernist, Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932), who “believed that the best human art was modeled on forms preexisting in nature.” How curious it is, then, that Blossfeldt’s images, faithfully reproducing nature but on an enlarged scale and with carefully controlled lighting, should illuminate the pages of that great sur/realist magazine, Documents, edited by Georges Bataille and used by him to illustrate his essay “The Language of Flowers.”

When I first look at Mutis I see what I take to be an art in nature and am thrilled by what I call the book of nature opening before my eyes. But then a little later I become self-conscious and aware of the artist arranging the flowers and stems so they conform to an aesthetic as much as a need on the part of the botanist for visual information. I had the same sensation as a medical student studying human anatomy. There was the corpse spread-eagled on its table in various shades of gray and blue with shards of yellowing fat and an insufferable odor of formaldehyde; by its side was my textbook displaying the body in shimmering symmetries of reds and blues and all the more accurate, not to mention beautiful, for being thus rendered. So what has happened? The art in nature turns out to be an art of nature! It is like treason, the same as when a child realizes Santa Claus is a man dressed up. But who is to blame, myself for being so naïve or the artist for being so clever? What is so silly is that every time I go back to look at these plant paintings of Mutis, which now strike me as pure kitsch, I run through the same sequence of delight and disappointment, of concealment and revelation, as the engagement with the art in nature is followed by its conversion into an art of nature.

Why would this be, this now-you-see-it now-you-don’t phenomenon? Is this what lies behind the sur of surrealism as in Bataille’s use of Blossfeldt? For while Blossfeldt with his magnifying lenses was pursuing the art in na-

Bone Art

What is fascinating to me is the absence of the human skull, that wicked, grinning fellow centering death in the baroque and our various childhood fantasies of death, but nowhere to be found in Echavarría’s work nor, apparently, in the mutilation itself. What did those mutilating Colombians do with the head, you wonder? Why can’t we see the face of death? “Alas poor Yorick.” Certainly in other forms of human bone art—to designate a category—the skull takes pride of place, its hollow eyes a dark reminder of what once was. In the pirate flag of skull and crossbones, loved by children of all ages and many nations, it is the idea that is paramount, the actual execution of the design often woefully imperfect—but who cares so long as the wind is up and the flag flutters, bringing the animating force of nature into play. There is another reason for not caring: this flag is also an antiflag—not merely a sign of belonging to no nation but a sign of refusal of all signs and hence of representation, too, as nature unfurls its own nation.6 Miles removed from this anarchic sign are the images Bataille displayed in Documents (August 1930) of Capuchin catacombs in Rome with their skulls and bones from more than 4,000 brothers who died between 1528 and 1870. What jaw-dropping images! Skulls are carefully arranged one next to the

ture, Bataille was enchanted by the rupture his images thereby created. Bataille’s point, surely, was not the elementary one that representation trumps nature, but rather that Blossfeldt’s images are like magic tricks in which you suspect sleight of hand but are nevertheless filled with wonder as the rabbit is extracted from the top hat. You are left suspended, unable to decide what is art and what is nature, temporarily stripped of your common sense with its assumptions as to the nature of nature let alone the nature of art. When it comes to the human body, that arbiter of the nature/culture divide, this becomes all the more pronounced. It is this that underlies all mutilation, whether of the corpse or the living body.

6.

Their rotten hulk seemed more inviting
That ship without a flag at all
Oh heavenly sky of streaming blue!
Enormous wind, the sails blow free!
Let wind and heaven go hang! But oh
Sweet Mary, let us keep the sea!

other yet in numbers so vast they lose all individuality to become like white
dimples on seawalls in underworlds at the far edge of dreams. No doubt
about it, this is art. With its mix of showbiz and heartfelt religious senti-
ments, Sedlec ossuary in the Czech Republic carries this bone art a stage fur-
ther, converting it into pure kitsch, draining the bones of whatever reverential
and religious potential they might possess and completely evacuating the ef-
fect that so fascinated Bataille, namely, the oscillation from repulsion to at-
traction, the movement that I think lies behind mutilation, in general, and
the Flower Vase Cut, taken up by Echavarrı´a, specifically. As with cartoons
and violence, the Sedlec kitsch demonstrates how fine the line is between the
smoher face of death and its comic qualities, a line that Bataille crossed again
and again in his investigations into the sacred surplus harvested by the trans-
formation of saints’ bones from the vile status of the corpse to their glowing
destination under the stones of church or altar, a transformation enacted on
a lesser scale with every body buried in the church cemetery. Mutilation is
this same movement, in reverse, yet no less religious.

But the headlessness?

Flowers and Death
Might it be that flowers are in effect human bones? For what the muti-
lation of the flower-vase cut draws upon is that flowers and death go to-
gether in the Christian world, with a long history of use on graves and in
funerals. Yet flowers salute not only death but also life, as with birthdays.
Could it be that flowers frequent death because they are seen as bearers of
life and that this “mix” is what enters so naturally into our everyday life-
rituals as something superbly sardonic, savage, cruel, and uplifting—like
the fall into nothingness expressed by the disturbing collusion of cartoons
and violence. “There are no black flowers,” writes Jean Genet in reference
to transgression, “yet at the end of his crushed finger, that black fingernail

7. And not only in the Christian world. In the index to Jack Goody’s recent book The Culture of
Flowers (Cambridge, 1993), p. 459, funerals are one of the major entries, with many subcategories
referring us to: “ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, ancient Rome, Asante, Confucian, contemporary
Europe, contemporary Hong Kong, contemporary India . . . [ending with] Socialist Europe.”
“Flowers are particularly associated with rites to the dead,” he writes with regards to China,
Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Even in Africa, where he finds, in comparison to Eurasia, little interest in
flowers, he notes the planting of red and green leafed bushes in Asante cemeteries. Yet Christianity
has not wholeheartedly endorsed the sacramental use of flowers. In fact there seems to be a
decided ambivalence. The Protestant Church is generally opposed to their use in ritual, and there
have been long stretches of time, such as the Middle Ages, when the church as a whole prohibited
their sacramental use. Could this ambivalence be a sign, however, of whatever it is that makes
flowers seem appropriate for death?
looked like nothing so much as a flower.” In Colombia this mix is heightened by the beauty and abundance of the gardenias and roses exported from the savannah of Bogotá these past thirty years, alongside the death dealing, fortune making cocaine and heroin processed from the coca plants in the lowlands and the beautiful poppies in the mountains. This intertwining of life in death in flowers is what Herr is getting at when he describes Saigon during the Vietnam War: “Sitting in Saigon was like sitting inside the folded petals of a poisonous flower, the poison history, fucked in its root no matter how far back you wanted to run your trace.”

Like life, only more so, flowers are beautiful and fragile, and this may be why many people consider them appropriate for death and even more so for disaster. This message comes across strongly in an article in the New York Times by Barbara Stewart, 22 September 2001, with reference to the attack on the World Trade Center. She notes the abundance of flowers, bunches of them, four and five layers deep, laid at the doorsteps of fire stations, churches, and impromptu shrines on park lawns, stoops, windows, and sidewalks. This turns her attention to the presence of flowers cultivated in little gardens throughout the city in the past decade. Against the backdrop of the city, these flowers strike her as incongruous: “heartbreakingly bright and fragile.”

“What’s more fragile than a flower?” asks her informant, the aptly named Michael Pollan, whom she describes as a writer on botany and a philosopher and goes on to quote with regards to the value of flowers as lying with their being useless. “Flowers are a luxury,” Mr. Pollan said. “They’re not useful. . . . You don’t worry about flowers until you’ve solved a lot of other problems in life.” Even his question—“What’s more fragile than a flower?”—can be thought of as a flower, a rhetorical question, we say.

But, when disaster strikes, the useless becomes useful.

Mandrake, the Magician

There is one flowering plant that stands out with regard to life and death in the same way as do Echavarría’s flowers, a plant that perturbs the pious platitudes of life and death and is known as the mandrake or mandragora, said to be the most important hallucinogen in western Europe and the Near East over two millennia. Hugo Rahner of the Society of Jesus says it can

9. Herr, Dispatches, p. 43.
be “the herb of life or of death, a symbol of both sensual love, the bringer of death, or of divine love, the restorer of life.”

Note, not just life, but love; not just life or death, but restorer of life. Mircea Eliade, the Romanian-born professor and virtual founder of the history of religions calls it “a miraculous plant, far stronger than any other . . . which can multiply life or strike dead.”

Miraculous indeed, it serves to cure infertility, arouse the organs of regeneration, accrue wealth, stave off accidents, and—in what we like to call the Dark Ages—was an indispensable element in the witch’s cauldron. Some say it is the plant Hermes gave Odysseus to resist the magic of Circe. It appears in the Old Testament in Genesis and in the Song of Songs and is said by scholars to be associated with witchcraft into modern times. Mandrakes were being sold in many herbalists’ shops in the poorer part of London even in the early twentieth century. One of the charges against Joan of Arc was that she carried a mandrake on her breast. In her defense she denied that, but said she had heard of a mandrake near her town. Women were burnt by the Inquisition as witches because of alleged possession of mandrakes, which they fed and clothed. For the mandrake was like a human being. Extracted from the ground it would be bathed several times a year and dressed in costly cloth or clothes and sometimes even fed with food and drink twice a day.

Part plant, part human, the mandrake is an astonishingly precise instance of something hovering between an art of nature and an art in nature, and surely this is what accounts, in part, at least, for its magical powers. It is described as a plant of very peculiar appearance, a perennial with broad leaves, a prominent white, yellow, or purple flower, with fruit like a plum or small apple. Over all it exudes a peculiar, pronounced, and pleasant scent. But the below-ground part is even more crucial. This is the foot-long blackish root, often forked, and said by many—but not all—to have a human form, even with a male sexual organ, which juts out as a subsidiary root. For this reason the mandrake is in many languages given a name suggesting man, or living being, from ancient Persia to ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and Turkey—parts of the ancient world from where it passed to northern Europe and east into Asia. In the Christian tradition it was said to be fashioned from the same earth whereof God formed Adam.

The technique considered to achieve the best mandrakes, as used in Syria and Turkey, was to extract the root, manipulate its shape with cutting and pressure, bandage it, and then replace it in the ground, giving it time to grow some more and thus, when extracted a second time, become—in the words of one source—"so natural in appearance as to make it difficult or impossible to discern where the artist shaped it."  

In 1891 von Luschan exhibited six mandrakes from Asia Minor, declaring that a "clever artist will thus produce these little figures which look entirely natural and whose genuineness no one would suspect. Such figures are not merely 'very rare and obtainable with great danger to life, but are considered costly and valuable talismans.'" By the sixteenth century this composite little fellow, art in nature/of nature, was being shipped over much of the world, from Iran to northern India, from Germany to France and England, and being imported into Egypt as well.

What about the bizarre ritual required to extract the mandrake from the ground? It shrieks as it is being pulled out. It shrieks like a person. That is why a dog, a black dog, at that, is required to pull it out and why, when the mandrake shrieks the dog falls dead. The point, as I see it, is this: coming out of the ground, the semi-human mandrake is in a classic liminal space betwixt and between an art in nature/of nature. This is precisely what ensures it will become more than human—that is, superhuman—and why at the point of transition from an art in nature to an art of nature it is too dangerous to be handled by a human.

And here, once again, in this most curious of all states between nature and art, lies the issue of the head. According to at least one Christian commentator—Rahner—the mandrake sadly lacks a head, thus making it a ripe subject for redemption to a heady state, while ancient and medieval illustrations depict it as both headless and with a head. In this regard, the illustrations I have found are really quite startling for not only are some with, others without, a head, but they vary greatly in their degree of dignified, soulful sanctity. Some have a marked iconlike look about them, resembling religious paintings used in the Church, while others look like cartoons (for example, the drawing of the mandrake being pulled by a dog chasing a ball). In either case it is the anthropomorphism that is eye-catching, disturbing, and fun (figs. 3a–e).

15. Simoons, Plants of Life, Plants of Death, p. 104; my emphasis.
17. As if to accentuate the metaphysical dilemma such a potent creature presents, either counterfeiting nature or counterfeiting art, there was deep concern in Early Modern Europe concerning counterfeit mandrakes being sold for great sums.
In keeping with its deeply ambiguous status, the mandrake has perplexing pharmacological effects, being credited with powerful pain-killing and sleep-inducing properties, as well as with erotic stimulation. One reads of “mandrake narcosis” no less than of its capacity to excite voluptuousness. The Christian bible tells me that “the Arabs call it ‘devil’s apple,’ from its power to excite voluptuousness.”


Figure 3c.—Mandrake, from the *Herbal of Pseudo-Apuleius*, seventh century, AD. Based on a fourth-century AD Greek source.
FIGURE 3d. Mandrake, from *Herbal of Pseudo-Apuleius*, seventh century AD. Based on a fourth-century AD Greek source.

FIGURE 3e. Mandrake, from a fifteenth-century Italian *Herbal*. 
The Language of the Language of Flowers: Acéphale

Who would have guessed it? In “The Language of Flowers” published in the magazine Documents in 1929, a magazine that despite its short tenure appears today as the crucible for much of what was intellectually audacious in the European avant-garde, Bataille, the magazine’s editor, singled out the mandrake as an example of what the plant world might teach us about the relation of beauty to sex and death.20

He was looking for processes in nature that, when framed in a particular manner, made you realize how models drawn from nature surreptitiously formed our thinking. Bataille’s title, “The Language of Flowers,” which I have borrowed, is itself borrowed from an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western European tradition similar to the Renaissance assumption of Egyptian hieroglyphs as a universal language uniting God with nature. We could say that as the hieroglyph was to the Renaissance magicians, such as Ficino and Bruno, so flowers were to those people in later centuries excited by the idea that flowers possessed a secret language. One book published in this tradition in 1867 begins with the statement: “I said to the flowers, Tell me what God told you to tell me.”21

Like the French ethnologist Robert Hertz, Bataille was excited by the way the patterns of symmetries and differences in the human body served for modeling culture. Hertz had focused on the role given to the hands and the division of the body into left and right. To the right hand go all the honors: justice, good, the sun, maleness, the hand of writing, and conservative politics. To the left there was sorcery, the moon, women, and communists. Twenty years later Bataille focused not on the vertical but the horizontal division of the human body into an upper, dignified half and a lower unmentionable one.

A keen student of Hegel’s dialectic and the unity of opposites, Bataille


21. Goody, The Culture of Flowers, p. 244. According to Goody this language had roots in eighteenth-century orientalism in the notion that there was an esoteric language of the harem, it being the conclusion of one Austrian savant that this was the secret language for lesbian attachments; see ibid., p. 234. Be that as it may, the French language of flowers seems to have been more concerned with tabulation, calling to mind the later structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss, as in his famous work, The Savage Mind, La Pensée sauvage, which puns as The Wild Pansy. In its late nineteenth-century emphasis on classificatory tables of smells and colors, as part of such system-building, the tradition of the language of flowers also recalls the early nineteenth-century work of the French visionary and communist Charles Fourier, beloved by both Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin. Although he nowhere makes mention of the fact, Bataille’s language of flowers thus emerges from two centuries of tradition with its roots in secrecy, the occult, orientalist fantasies, and an appeal to a logic of nature that makes accessible divine wisdom. Yet at the same time his essay marks a radical departure from this tradition.
brought a surrealist sensibility and love of the absurd to bear on the way the upper and lower parts of the body related to cosmic schemes of reconciliation and redemption. It was Bataille’s contention that a true dialectic could never come to rest. Hence not only could there be no truce to the war raging between the superior and the inferior, but thought itself was set permanently ajar and out of sorts because thought relied on these categories read into nature. Therefore as regards the language of flowers, and especially with the fearsome mandrake, Bataille had a field day.

Bataille’s point overlaps with the New York Times article on the function of flowers following the World Trade Center attack. Yet the differences are instructive, for Bataille sees flowers as sexual metaphors that bring death and eroticism into conjunction with beauty. He compares flowers to human sex organs, stamens and petals directed towards the sun, and the essence of their beauty owes much to the fragility of their life. Doomed to die almost as soon as they bloom, they wither sadly on the stem in rank disorder, eventually falling to the ground from which they came. Hence, his conclusion to “The Language of Flowers”: “Don’t all these beautiful things run the risk of being reduced to a strange mise en scène?” he asks. “Are not they destined to make sacrilege more impure?”

If Hertz had seen a complementarity in the woeful asymmetry between the right and left hands, Bataille sees a similar imbalance between the good and evil in making up the sacred sphere. They not only feed off one another and are complementary, as in the Christian scheme of heaven and hell, but their asymmetry ensures an excess that cannot be contained by the play of opposites. This is Bataille’s signature idea, and this is what is implied in his question concerning flowers: “Are not they destined to make sacrilege even more impure?” And to sharpen his point, to bring his cascading thoughts to their highest head of pressure, he then focuses on the mandrake.

The mandrake expresses the passage from the sacred to sacrilege with astonishing clarity. In its very shape it can be said to express the cosmic architecture of heaven and hell and its analogue in the human body. For Christians the headlessness is a sign of possible future redemption from sin. But for Bataille this headlessness is nature’s acéphale, the name his group applied to their sacred, secret society in the late 1930s, emblematized by André Masson’s drawing of a headless man, naked with arms outstretched, a dagger in one hand, a flaming heart like a hand grenade in the other, stars

22. Bataille, “The Language of Flowers,” p. 14. In this respect I think also of the rainbow. Like the flower, the rainbow is remarkable for its mysterious effulgence of color and its ephemerality. Once “picked,” it too withers to yield not debris and dirt, but a sex change or a pot of gold—just out of reach. So let us anticipate what fun it would be to write another essay, “The Language of Rainbows.”
as nipples, and a skull in place of genitalia. “I saw him immediately as headless, as becomes him,” said Masson. “But what to do with this cumbersome and doubting head?—Irresistibly it finds itself displaced to the sex, which it masks with a ‘death’s head’” (fig. 4).

Figure 4. The acéphale.
page photographic enlargements of a big toe that effectively estranged this part of our anatomy. It looked fearsome yet silly at the same time, a thoroughly vexed dialectic, you could say, once again the Mutis/Echavarría conundrum: an art in nature or an art of nature?

But more than that—and here is where the irreducible excess comes in—was tone and stomach. Tone meant in this case the tone of the absurd and the tone of laughing, not exactly ideas but something else. But what is this something else? Likewise the stomach, not just the Rabelaisian belly laugh of carnival, but the stomach of the motile intestine, smooth muscle irregularly pulsing with the echoes of a distant pinging as with a stone hurled into a mine shaft full of water, and the whole unholy morass of circular motion displaced by quiverings and unsteady forward motion of chyme. It was to this swampland of the informe that all roads led, Bataille’s Rome no less than his Big Toe, and it is this same swamp he had in mind when he envisaged a headless man unaware of prohibition—“He is not a man. He is not a God either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster” (“I,” p. 14).

In conclusion, therefore, like the mandrake, this image of the acéphale does not simply invert heaven and hell, but deranges their interdependence such that there is little possibility of dialectical recuperation or, for that matter, of redemption. It is as if the dialectic consumes itself, reminding us that self-sacrifice is the mark of divinity as when the god takes his own life (see Catholicism and The Golden Bough). Behind this lurks both the joy and despair of the realization that, like language, reason is at best an approximation of reality that always exceeds the terms and schemes by which we organize it. Similarly with the mandrake we are propelled into a world of “bizarre psychoactivity”—midway between sleep and consciousness—a rhizomic mass of roots, according to Bataille, “swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin.”

But why is it that the most magically powerful mandrake is to be found under the gallows?

The Little Gallows Man

Fact: For centuries in Europe it was said that where a man was hanged by the state a white flower might sprout from his ejaculated semen or urine. That flower was none other than mandrake, and it came to be called “the

little gallows man.”  However it is not the innocent white flower that attracts attention here. In fact the flower is merely the sign, beautiful and striking in its own right, for the marvels of the black root twisting itself deep into the soil in its efforts to acquire a human form.

This is nicely set forth for England as early as 1587 by one Thomas Newton in his book, An Herbal to the Bible, which provides a separate chapter for each plant of importance. The first chapter is dedicated to mandrake, the second to manna (mandrake comes before manna). Newton describes mandrake as having a strong scent and taste, provoking sleep, pleasant and delightful. Cloven into branches or limbs, like legs, folding and wrapped one about another, the root is covered with fine threads or small hairs—such that makeshifts and deceitful peddlers derive shapes of humans, male or female, and persuade the simple ignorant people that they grow naturally out of the earth and are magically empowered.  

Some of this lewd rabble of shifting mates and shameless deceivers, impudently and boldly announce and constantly affirm, that this is a creature, having life, and engendered under the earth of the seed of some dead person, that has been convicted and put to death for some felony or murder.

It was said in the sixteenth century that for mandrake to be effective it must be gathered from under the scaffold, and that is why it was so expensive. Others held that mandrake only grew next to the scaffold. Still others opined that it was the most potent form that was to be found under a gallows.

Folklore: Carefully extracted from the soil by bizarre and magical means, washed in red wine and wrapped in precious silks, red and white, this little gallows man will answer any question put to him about future or about secret matters. “Would you be rich”? Put money beside him at night and in the morning it will be doubled.

25. “Little gallows man,” from the German Galgenmännlein. See Thompson, The Mystic Mandrake, p. 166. According to one source the little gallows man could also arise from the froth that fell to the ground from the choking mouth of a hanged woman. I thank Christopher Lamping for this reference as well as the reference to Peter Linnebaugh’s essay on hanging (see below). I have only come across this one reference to mandrake and hanged women. The issue seems to me to revolve around male seed. On the other hand, woman’s part in this gallows/mandrakes scheme has ever so much to do with capturing fertility.


27. Ibid., p. 11.


31. Thompson, Mystic Mandrake, p. 169.
Fact: The German poet Rist (1607–1667) described a mandrake over one hundred years old. It lived in a coffin over which was placed a tapestry depicting a thief on the gallows, underneath which grew a mandrake. It would pass from father to youngest son.  

Fiction: Early on in Genet’s novel Querelle, first published in 1953, the character Gil walks through the foggy streets of the naval port of Brest, northern France, with his buddy, Querelle. They are talking about sex and through his pocket Gil flattens his penis against his belly. “Indeed, it had the stature of a tree,” writes Genet, “a mossy-boled oak with lamenting mandrakes being born among its roots. (Sometimes, when he woke up with a hard-on, Gil would address his prick as ‘my hanged man.’)”

Fact: Audiences of up to 100,000 were claimed to have attended hangings in London in the latter half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Crowds of three to seven thousand were standard. In the mighty spectacle that was the public hanging (as many as eight a day during one year in the second half of the eighteenth century), the London mob fought the authorities at the scaffold for possession of the corpse, and this for a variety of motives: to ensure a Christian burial; to prevent the corpse being sold to surgeons and medical schools; and because of what that ingenious advocate of free market capitalism, Bernard de Mandeville, described in 1725 as the “superstitious Reverence of the Vulgar for a Corpse, even of a Malefactor.”

Fact: But the corpse of a person hanged by the state is no ordinary corpse. The social historians rightly hesitate to entertain the macabre worlds opened up by these weird varieties of necrophilia that challenge all propriety, including intellectual propriety. That threshold can only be crossed by the novelists, as we see in the works of Genet or William Burroughs. Yet is not something of the order of that imagination necessary if we are to even begin to relate to the state’s investment in capital punishment—not to mention the public’s investment, in the U.S. today, as well? How else are we going to connect to what seems so outrageously indecent, the magic of the corpse, let alone its erotic potential, once it is pointed out to us that not so long ago in decent, wholesome, Western society the state-hanged corpse was an especially wondrous entity, capable of restoring life and health in sick people?

In a recent essay on crowds, carnival, and the state, in English executions, Thomas Laqueur designates the hanged body as “the magic body.” He cites James Boswell in 1776 describing the “superstition” he witnessed at a Lon-

32. See Simoons, Plants of Life, Plants of Death, p. 127.
33. Genet, Querelle, p. 20.
don hanging whereby “no less than four diseased persons had themselves rubbed with the sweaty hands of malefactors in the agonies of death, and believed this would cure them.” It was said that a withered limb could be made whole by placing it on the neck of a recently hanged man and women visited the gallows to be stroked by a just-dead hand so as to become fertile. Nurses brought children in their care to be touched so as to ensure the health of their young charges. And just before Murphy the coal heaver was cut down from the gallows at Tyburn in 1768, a well-dressed woman appeared with a child aged three to pass his right hand three times over “the child’s left hand which had four holes in it from the King’s Evil” (scrofula).

The name tells it all. The King’s Evil. For just as the corpse of the state-executed criminal could cure this disease, so the king with the mere passing of his hand could also cure this horrific, lingering, and often fatal illness. Thanks to state execution, king and corpse of the malefactor are made magically equivalent.

**Fiction:**

“You must touch with the limb the neck of the man who’s been hanged.”

She started a little at the image he had raised.

“Before he’s cold—just after he’s cut down,” continued the conjuror impassively.

“How can that do good?”

“It will turn the blood and change the constitution. But, as I say, to do it is hard. You must go to the jail when there’s a hanging, and wait for him when he’s brought off the gallows. Lots have done it, though perhaps not such pretty women as you. I used to send dozens for skin complaints.”

This is a conjuror speaking in the southwest of mid-nineteenth-century England in Thomas Hardy’s tale, “The Withered Arm.” The young woman he is addressing has an incurable disease withering her arm, a disease that bears the marks of sorcery.

The day before the hanging she sees the harness maker fashioning the rope for the hanging. “‘Tis sold by the inch afterwards,” he tells her. “I could get you a bit miss, for nothing, if you’d like?” (“WA,” p. 49).


Later at night she makes a surreptitious visit to the hangman whose normal occupation—this being a country town—is that of a gardener. “‘Tis no use to come here about the knot,’” he tells her before she can explain that what she wants is to touch the neck as soon as the man has been hung. Examining her withered arm he exclaims: “‘That is the class o’ subject, I’m bound to admit! I like the look of the wound; it is truly as suitable for the cure as any I saw. Twas a knowing-man that sent ‘ee, whoever he was’” (“WA,” pp. 50, 51).

**Interpolation:** Why the knot? Because if death was due to strangling, rather than breaking the neck by the fall of the body, then the knot could be adjusted so as to give the victim a chance of surviving, which is why Peter Linebaugh in his essay on hanging in London wryly refers to the public’s great interest in knot lore.

Next day she approaches the corpse supported on two trestles. She feels a gray mist floating before her and can barely discern anything. “It was as though she had nearly died,” writes Hardy, “but was held up by a sort of galvanism” (“WA,” p. 53).

**Interpolation:** Somewhere between dying and galvanism. Could this be equivalent to the “bizarre psychoactivity” attributed to the mandrake by our ethnobotanical experts Schultes and Hofmann?

The hangman took her poor cur’s arm, uncovered the face of the corpse, and laid her arm across the dead man’s neck, “upon a line the colour of an unripe blackberry, which surrounded it” (“WA,” p. 53). She shrieked. The “turn of the blood” predicted by the conjuror had taken place.

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**Hanging as Sex as the Magic of the State**

Hanging not only turns the blood of those able to touch the neck but may turn on the person being hung. At least this is part of the folklore of sexual excitement, testimony to Bataille’s coupling of sexual pleasure with death.39 Knud Romer Jorgensen reminds us of erotic hanging in the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (1791) and informs us of an infamous case that went

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39. Known in some circles as autoerotic asphyxia or asphyxophilia, hanging has been used as a treatment for erectile dysfunction and impotence in Europe since at least the early 1600s. A French psychiatrist reported in 1856 that 30 percent of men who died from hanging had erections or ejaculations. In a survey of ninety-seven suicides among young people in the Boston area during 1941–1950, one investigator found twenty-seven of them to be possibly due to autoerotic hanging gone wrong. See “The Autoerotic Asphyxiation Syndrome in Adolescent and Young Adult Males,” [http://members.aol.com/bj022038/](http://members.aol.com/bj022038/)
to trial in London that same year on account of a prostitute, Susannah Hill, assisting a composer, and one of the greatest double bass players in Europe, Frantz Kotzwara, to hang himself for sexual pleasure with fatal results.40

Hanged bodies jerking at the end of a rope in orgasm appear often in the span of William Burroughs’s life’s work from Naked Lunch to Cities of the Red Night. In the latter book, Kelley killed the quartermaster of his ship while at anchor in Tangier and was sentenced to death by hanging but some pirates come, cut him down, and revive him. “It was thought,” writes Burroughs, “that a man who had been hanged and brought back to life would not only bring luck to their venture but also ensure protection against the fate from which he had been rescued.”41

At the same time in those cities of the red night, hanging has become a nightclub act, reminding us once again of the uncanny relationship between cartoons and violence. Take the club called the Double Gallows where there is a hanging show every night, and one night in particular, Flasher Night, is especially wonderful as chic clients make unexpected entrances in extravagant gear. Some pop up through the floor in green drag, “screaming like mandrakes,” Burroughs says. Others arrive through mirrors with ropes already around their necks while “noose peddlers circulate among the clients” who feel the quality of the nooses. There are silk ones, “in all colors, 40. See Knud Romer Jorgensen, “Please Be Tender When You Cut Me Down,” http://www.sexuality.org/l/fetish/aspydang.html. An anonymous pamphlet of 1792, the “Art of Strangeling, etc. . . .” states that it was one Jonathan Wild who first discovered, while examining the pockets of hanged felons that “they evinced certain emotions and commotions, which . . . proved that all flesh must die to live again” (quoted in ibid.).

41. William Burroughs, Cities of the Red Night (New York, 1981), p. 70; hereafter abbreviated C. So the pirates rub red ink into the hemp marks around Kelley’s neck to keep the magic visible. Kelley claimed he had learned the secrets of death on the gallows such that he was endowed with unbeatable skill as a swordsman and with such sexual prowess that no man or woman could resist him. When asked what it was like being hung, Kelley responded:

At first I was sensible of a very great pain due to the weight of my body and felt my spirits in a strange commotion violently pressed upwards. After they reached my head, I saw a bright blaze of light which seemed to go out at my eyes with a flash. Then I lost all sense of pain. But after I was cut down, I felt such indescribable pain from the pricking and shooting as my blood and spirits returned that I wish those who had cut me down could have been hanged.

Actually these words are credited to “Half-Hanged Smith,” a former soldier hanged for burglary in 1705. Burroughs found them in The History of Torture; see Daniel P. Mannix, The History of Torture (New York, 1964), p. 110. It appears that Smith had been hanging for fifteen minutes before he was cut down following a reprieve on account of his military record. Hanging at that time rarely meant snapping the neck with instantaneous death. Instead the victim was slowly choked to death, dancing at the end of the rope (which might later be sold for high sums in small lengths). Hence Smith was still living when cut down and from that point on, as Half-Hanged Smith, he led a miraculous career being repeatedly arrested for burglary, yet always freed. At one point the prosecutor dropped dead during the trial. The law no longer had any hold over this half-hanged individual.
hemp cured and softened in rare unguents, tingle nooses burning with a soft blue flame, leather nooses made from sniffhound hide.” Led in by a red demon comes the star of the show, a dummy called Whitey who stands with the noose around his neck, cock almost hard, pupils pinpointed. “The platform falls and he hangs there ejaculating and a blaze of light flashes out of his eyes.”

“A Flasher! a Flasher! The clients throw up their arms and wriggle . . . ecstatically” (C, pp. 179, 180, 181).

To my mind, being cut down in the nick of time is equivalent to what I wish to call the mandrake state-execution magical complex, a mouthful, to be sure, but then this is a hard row to hoe. In my opinion, the magic Burroughs invokes, magic that permeates his entire body of work, comes not from hanging per se but from state execution carried over into other spheres where the hanging bears the “shadow” of state executions. This is the same magic gathered together by the little gallows man, taken a stage further by Burroughs so as to release his intimate familiars: color, smell, and a train of unearthly memories sweeping back and forth through time and space as transhistorical unconscious.

Take the handsome young Captain Strobe being hung for piracy in 1702 in front of the courthouse of Panama City. There is a curious smile on his face and a yellow-green aura surrounds his body. Rescued dangling on the gibbet in the hot sun by a hit-squad and fed opium, he awakens with a throbbing erection. He knows where he is: forty miles south of Panama City. “He could see the low coastline of mangrove swamps laced with inlets, the shark fins, the stagnant seawater” (C, p. 29).

Captain Strobe is hung; Captain Strobe returns to the living. He awakes not in heaven but in the swamp, in the equatorial third world swamp where anything could happen in a headless world where God is dead. He awakens with his body intact, indeed more than intact, afloat on opium and with a throbbing erection. Acéphale.

Remember: “It was thought,” writes Burroughs, “that a man who had been hanged and brought back to life would not only bring luck to their venture but also ensure protection against the fate from which he had been rescued.”

The question then is this: What is this mysterious power that is snatched from the jaws of the state? Nietzsche condemns the police for practicing the same deceits as the criminals they apprehend. In his eyes this makes them worse than the criminals. Is this why judicial murder is a good deal more mystical than other sorts of murder? It not only kills and eliminates a person. It seems to release an energy into the world.
Is Captain Strobe the Little Gallows Man?

Ever-sensitive to Christian allegory, Rahner tells us that just as Christ, “like one who is poisoned, fell asleep in death and yet awoke to life as the wondrous root from the earth of Adam, so too the Christian who wishes to free himself from Adam’s poisoning and numbness, must take the cup of mandrake in his hand” (GM, pp. 259–60). Rahner wants us to see Christ’s mutilated body as a body readied for redemption, as if so much pain must, by some law, be rewarded as the harmonious meshing of opposites resulting in a transcendental payoff. But could we not equally well argue that the power of Jesus lies in the Roman colonial state’s use of capital punishment and that what is found in Tyburn with Murphy the coal heaver and with all those just-dead hands wiped across the bodies of sick children in eighteenth-century London, that all of these practices as well as those presented by Genet and Burroughs are but the expression of the magic of the little gallows man—not Jesus—sprouting under the scaffold? The little gallows man, our mystical mandrake, with its reputation for hallucinogenic effects, voluptuousness, and occult power speaks to this fantastic process of state execution as the founding moment of a religion, repeated with each state hanging. The magic of the little gallows man is nothing less than the magic of the state.

To this we might add the fearsome thesis that the Enlightenment expresses the domination of nature, to such an extent that nature returns as a prehistoric and magical force within the rule of law.\(^{42}\) Nowhere does the famous dialectic of the Enlightenment occur with greater élan than with capital punishment for nowhere does the prehistoric surface in modernity with greater alarm. And nowhere else, therefore, would we expect the mandrake plant to surge more appropriately than under the hanging tree. Just as the gallows reverts to nature as the hanging tree, as the speech of time would have it, so the mandrake plant becomes a socialized human being, the little gallows man.

Emergent from the seed of the judicially murdered criminal, mandrake is preeminently contradictory—poisonous, soporific, and voluptuous—in a word, miasmatic, from the ancient Greek word meaning polluted, a contagious spiritual condition of considerable danger such as that surrounding the corpse or the murderer.\(^{43}\) Mandrake contains and focuses this conta-
region, as its powerful scent gives testimony. Mandrake is proof of the continuity of life at the precise moment when life is being taken by the state; it is the life—the excess, if you will—that escapes death as the noose tightens; it is the life that is created by death—the perverse, magical, turned-around life that only state violence could create. If we are to follow custom and define the state as that which has the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, would it not be equally true to say that the mandrake springing from underneath the gallows expresses the mystical foundations of authority on which that violence, and the law, rest?

Postscript

Despite many visits to Colombia since 1969, I myself had never once heard of the Flower-Vase Cut until Echavarría’s artwork, and I found myself wondering about its frequency. Echavarría cites as his source a 1978 book concerned with massacres during the violencia of 1948–1964 in just one, albeit heavily afflicted, region, that of Tolima.44 To ensure that the reader understands the different mutilations, this book presents eleven full-page diagrams of the human form like those used in target practice, providing what at first sight seems like a cross between the egg-and-sausage figures that children draw and diagrams meant to exude clinical detachment. I imagine police or people responsible for autopsy reports may have diagrams similar to these, which I find frightening and destabilizing, indeed. Could it be that just as cartoons have a vexed and alarming connection to violence, so adults’ appropriation of children’s drawings of the human form has a similarly disturbing overlap with the police and autopsies? Or is it because these forms are so detached from reality, so clearly, so strenuously unreal, yet nevertheless terribly real—as in their use in clinical settings—that they acquire the haunting power of ghosts? Being so utterly without life, these diagrams of the outline of the human form create an emptiness that no mutilation or cartoon ever did. Here the art in nature and the art of nature coalesce and collapse the one in the other with a final phut (fig. 5).

Thomas Hobbes presents us with the same conundrum. He claimed that violence was the state of nature and, thanks to the famous contract, violence became the nature of the state. When I look at Mutis and see the flowers metamorphose from an art in nature to an art of nature, I am in my way replaying Hobbes’s metamorphosis, too. Hobbes’s contract is a fiction. It

never happened as such. Yet everything conspires to occur as if it happened, and it is the mighty reed from which the rule of law is suspended (as I read Rawls), which is why we call it not a fiction but a necessary fiction, the realm, after all, of great art. Thus what might be called one of humanity’s greatest inventions and institutions, namely the state, can honestly lay claim to being great art, too, precisely where the art in nature and the art of nature coalesce in the permanent threat of violence against the person.

What then is capital punishment? Is it not exemplary of the law of mutilation? In his critique of violence, Walter Benjamin said it was the reenactment of the state’s “founding violence.” Actually the title of this essay, “Kritik der Gewalt,” can mean both a critique of violence and a critique of
authority, the one word, Gewalt, collapsing the two meanings into the one unsteady mix like Mutis/Echavarría. In other words we can think of this founding violence as an actual physical human conflict, of which there was much in Hobbes’s time, including bloody violence against the king. But we can also think more precisely of founding violence as this unsteady mix of an art in nature with an art of nature wherein violence becomes authority. Thus is the mystery solved—how might becomes right. A singular, if not exactly solid, achievement.

This is what Echavarría’s flowers mean to me and why Chuck Jones finds it easier to humanize animals than humanize humans.