



Colouring Benjamin

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review of:

Samuel Weber (2008) *Benjamin's -abilities*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. (PB, pp.363, £14.95, ISBN 9780674046061)

Michael Taussig (2009) *What color is the sacred?* University of Chicago Press: Chicago. (PB, pp. 292, £16.50, ISBN 9780226790060)

The past is desperate energy, live, an electric field. It chooses a single moment, a chance so domestic we don't know we've missed it, a moment that crashes into us from behind and changes all that follows. (Michaels, 2009: 253)

A decade ago I co-authored a Taussig/Weber 'double-bill' review essay for *ephemera* (De Cock and Volkmann, 2002) and I remember struggling somewhat to make connections between the two books. This time around I experienced no such problem. Weber's book is very much *about* Walter Benjamin, whilst Taussig reads his material *with* Benjamin. In using and reflecting on Benjamin's work, both authors give an extra layer of depth and colour to that work. Hence the title of this review: *Colouring Benjamin*. Being *with* and *about* Benjamin, the books inevitably return to the issues of language and writing and how these condition the way we see the world and our efforts in helping others to see, value and understand that world. These concerns are introduced nicely on the dust cover of Weber's book, which starts with an epigraph by Benjamin: 'There is no world of thought that is not a world of language'¹.

¹ Taussig (2006: 20) pokes gentle fun at our current-day uses and abuses of his aphorisms in an essay on Walter Benjamin's grave: '...yet another quotation from Benjamin's writings. His texts seem to be full of pithy statements apt for gravestones and monuments, and there is no shortage of writers who, desirous of some spectral profundity, paste in a slice or two. Poor Benjamin. To have his pearls thus cast. This one read: "There is no document of civilization that is not a document of barbarism"'.

Benjamin's -abilities

Such ambivalent -abilities – splinters of a word – endow Walter Benjamin's writings with much of the enigmatic fascination that has made them increasingly difficult to ignore but even more difficult to respond to. (121)

Weber remarks (357) that the chapters making up his book span forty years, but the bulk seems to have been written especially for this publication. He uses the suffix '-ability' (-*barkeit* in German) as an organizing concept for the first part of the book (and for its rather intriguing title). To list just some of the -abilities making up separate chapters: criticizability, impartability; translatability; citability. Nouns formed with this suffix, Weber suggests, refer to a potentiality or virtuality; to a capacity rather than an existing reality. The obsession with endowing the present with its virtuality, with its abilities to become other than it is and than it has been, is perhaps the dominant motif in Benjamin's writings. Benjamin dreamt of bringing a certain history to a standstill, to a *Zustand*, and thus to keep open the possibility of what is *yet to come* (which, as Weber points out, in German as in French, is the name assigned the English word 'future': *Zu-kunft, a-venir*). Paradoxically, the place of this future is nowhere if not *now*. It involves the exposure of 'the goings-on of being-present' (105). Weber sees Benjamin's thinking and writing as marked by a double – 'cracked' – tone. They are full of melancholy, sadness and mourning, but he also finds them full of engagement, militancy and hope, 'because the very same fracture that is felt as loss also opens up the (linguistic) possibility of this loss itself being lost, imparting and thus altering itself and thereby keeping the way open for the coming of something radically different' (119). It is this crack that constitutes the chance of history to be something more than the mere registration and reproduction of what has been – its *potentiality* in other words. Phenomena can be saved precisely through the disclosure of the crack or breach in them.

The notion of '-ability' is also closely related to that of style (viz. chapter 8: 'Ability and Style'). Benjamin's texts never quite come together as a work, but at most as a 'constellation' (a concept I will explore in more detail below) in which empty spaces are at least as important as the 'stars' the constellation serves to situate (Ferris, 2008). Benjamin is fascinated with the knots and nodes, links and interstices that make up 'the net in which we stand',² whilst being acutely aware that the net, or the general context, does not allow itself to be demonstrated. For Weber, the essential issues at stake with Benjamin are thus always to be found in the margins and interstices of his writing: 'The general pattern is to take one step forward and the next step back, but slightly to the side, slightly skewed' (134 – in the following four pages Weber works through the example of the concept of 'Origin' to illustrate the point). This has implications for how we should read Benjamin (and read more generally!) of course:

2 'We cannot draw closed the net in which we stand' Benjamin famously wrote in a letter from 1921, explaining why he would not write an essay entitled 'Capitalism as Religion' (250).

To read then is not to go with the flow, as one speaks – or believes that one speaks – but rather groping, stumbling, interrupting oneself, like an older person whose sight has weakened bends over a text, following its movement with her fingers, always stopping anew, but only in order to continue. Such reading goes against the grain of meaning, so that the text does not disappear into it but remains as a figure: a written image (*Schriftbild*). (299)

As a corollary, criticism does not involve the evaluation of individual works but rather their fulfilment, their *Vollendung*. Following Benjamin, the German word must be read in a double sense, entailing on the one hand the completion of the work and on the other its consumption. The value of a work can be measured to the degree to which it allows the process of criticism to take place: ‘Through this history of citation and recitation, reinscription and transformation, the earlier versions take on a significance that they otherwise might not have had’ (97). Benjamin thus clearly functions as a predecessor for much of the work on reception theory (cf. Volkmann and De Cock, 2010). Weber tries to be a good critic and much of his writing in this book can be read as an instantiation of that about which he is writing. It would make little sense then simply to follow the flow of the book in this review. Rather, in a way that stays true to both Benjamin and Weber we can explore Weber’s writing ‘as tracing lines of force that lead in certain directions’ (231) – lines that criss-cross this book. Three such interlacing ‘lines of force’ concern the future (in terms of a ‘remaining open to’ as outlined above); Benjamin’s epistemology (in particular as found in convolute N of the *Arcades project*, which goes by the title *On the theory of knowledge, Theory of progress*); and the dialectic (in particular the ‘dialectical image’). I will address the latter two in turn.

A key epistemological concern for Benjamin was to rethink the relationship between ‘a certitude of knowledge that is lasting’ (the concept) and ‘the dignity of an experience that passes’ (the empirical) (168). Benjamin’s mode of investigation is indebted here to Schmitt’s (2006) *Political Theology*, which was written in the early years of the Weimar Republic. Both Benjamin and Schmitt insist on the significance of the extreme case: for them the formation of a concept is dependent on a contact or an encounter with a singularity that exceeds or eludes the concept. In other words, concepts take their point of departure in the extreme. The more precisely the empirical is investigated as an extreme the more profoundly it will be penetrated. By driving complex phenomena to their extremes, concepts do not reveal what makes them like other phenomena, but rather what distinguishes them and makes them ‘*einmalig-extrem*’. Things must not be grasped as a mere instantiation of some universal essence. Instead, the investigator must deploy a range of specific concepts that, in Cubist style, refract the object in many directions or penetrate it from a range of diffuse angles (Eagleton, 1990). Benjamin thus seeks to gather examples of the ‘smallest and most precisely cut components’ in order to discover what he calls ‘the crystal of the total event’ (Benjamin, 1999: 461; AP N2, 6³). The component elements of the object are dismantled through the power of minutely particular concepts, reconfiguring these in a pattern which then becomes an idea. This idea is not a universal essence, but the way the object is conceptually configured in its disparate and extreme elements, thus

3 This notation indicates that the quote can be found in the *Arcades project*, Convolute N, note 2.6.

preserving its irreducible heterogeneity (Eagleton, 1990). Weber cites from Benjamin's 'Epistemo-Critical Preface' to his study of the *Origin of the German tragic drama* to represent his ideal critical method:

Ideas are to objects as constellations are to the stars. This means in the first place that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena... [in them] phenomena are partitioned and at the same time redeemed. (313)

In this analogy Benjamin draws attention to the fact that a constellation does not determine the content of stars, it only determines the relation of stars to one another in a way that gives them a form. The stars are not changed – they remain what they were before the constellation is recognized – and the stars play no role in determining the form of the constellation (Ferris, 2008).

The Kantian notion of a 'disjunctive synthesis', which allows for a certain non-synthesis of two concepts (e.g. thesis and antithesis) in another, is an important complementary point of departure for Benjamin's critical method as it allows for the conception of a relationship between concepts 'capable of relating the "temporal singularity" of experience to the "timeless certitude" of the concept' (165). Weber elucidates using another analogy:

What Benjamin seems to be arguing for, therefore, involves a relationship of awakening to the dream in which separation itself becomes the constitutive factor: awakening relates to the dream precisely in being separated from it. It is this relating through separation or as separation that characterizes what he calls the 'constellation'. This could indicate how a certain 'non-synthesis' could nevertheless relate concepts to one another while preserving their differences and without subordinating them to a totalizing continuity or unity. (168)

Out of such a non-synthetic constellation results what Weber calls 'knowability' or *Erkennbarkeit*, rather than knowledge. Knowability cannot be reduced to the positive knowledge it both makes possible and relativizes, and it is always situated in a place that can never be fully actualized. Its manifestation is inseparable from its vanishing. It is important to emphasize that the 'awakening' alluded to in the quote above has to be distinguished both from consciousness and from unconsciousness and thus has to be investigated on its own terms; as a distinctive experience and not simply as a transition from the dream to being-awake. To quote from the Arcades Project again:

Is awakening perhaps the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the 'now of recognizability' in which things put on their true -surrealist- face. Thus, in Proust, the importance of staking an entire life on life's supremely dialectical point of rupture: awakening. Proust begins with the evocation of the space of someone waking up. (AP N3a, 3)

Benjamin (and Weber in his wake – viz. chapter 11: 'Awakening') thus goes back to Proust and even further to Marx. Convolute N of the Arcades Project, from which I have already quoted a few times and to which I shall return, starts with a quotation from a letter by Marx from 1843: 'The reform of consciousness consists solely in... the awakening of the world

from its dream about itself' (456). In a way one could say that Benjamin's Arcades Project is devoted to rendering revolutionary possibilities conceivable through its attempt to foster a dialectical consciousness. The moment of awakening emphasized by Benjamin is the moment at which history emerges from the dream of a continuity between past and present;⁴ from the dream that it is simply a record of progress. The past that Benjamin is interested in has only a spectral presence in the present. His gaze is firmly fixed on the debris of history, on the insignificant (Lucero-Montano, 2004). Benjamin wants to actualize this past in such a way that it is capable of releasing a revolutionary potential in the present; bringing it into a 'critical state'. It is the problem of such actualization that informs a crucial concept which he developed in convoluted N; that of the dialectical image. This critical state arises from an image formed by the past and the present. In this dialectical image, the past and the present suddenly enter into a relation that Benjamin calls a constellation. As Ferris (2008: 120) points out, 'such constellations do not occur at just any moment. Nor are they the product of a more advanced ability to interpret the past. Rather, they are the product of a present that is ready to receive a meaning that the past could not realize'. It is worth going back to the original here in order to capture all of the nuances in Benjamin's writing:

It is not what is past that casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, the image is where what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical... Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognisability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (AP N3, 1)

Past and present are brought together dialectically, but this constellation does not allow itself to be enveloped in an ongoing history or narrative. It forms an instantaneous flash where the past is illuminated precisely at the moment of its disappearance into the present (Lucero-Montano, 2004). It ignites in the 'now of recognisability'. Its significance is not to present the past as it really was. Instead, the belief is expressed here that the past contains a contingency that only the present is able to recognize; the contingency in the past is preserved for the time in which its significance becomes readable in this 'now of recognisability', allowing it to appear momentarily as a force in the present. What is crucial is that Benjamin defines the image as both the medium and the result of a process by which phenomena become readable, and thereby transform time into history. Weber expands: 'Benjamin here cites the image as the instance through which the Now becomes knowable (*erkennbar*) because readable (*lesbar*). And this process is described as a process of

4 It is a theme we will revisit in Taussig's *What color is the sacred?* He quotes from Convoluted N to give an insight into Benjamin's philosophy of history: 'In order for a part of the past to be touched by the present actuality there must be no continuity between them' (198). In an earlier book (Taussig, 2006: 6) had described Benjamin's philosophy of history as 'something in which every detail of a life counted, nothing was to be forgotten, the present had an ironclad obligation to the past, and running as a slender thread through all of this was the ever-so-faint possibility of redemption'.

transformation that goes on within the image rather than in its relation to what is outside' (314).

Given the importance of the dialectical image in Benjamin's later writings it may appear somewhat surprising that this concept should possess so few actual examples. But then again, as Ferris (2008) warns, in actualizing the dialectical image and sustaining it beyond the moment when it flashes before us we could rob it of its force. At the very least, any attempt at providing an example of what a dialectical image could be has to rise to the occasion and provide the linguistic and stylistic subtlety so typical of Benjamin. Perhaps one such decent attempt is Taussig's (2006: 102) description. The setting here is a ferry from the city disgorging its well-heeled passengers onto the wharf at Long Nose Point at Balmain, Sydney:

In this regard I wonder if these strange silhouettes of 'hollowed out' businesspeople stepping off the ferry, no less than the quiet people fishing on the wharf, more nature than culture, have absorbed into themselves the dead past of these waterfront suburbs, their dead boat-building industriousness and once-busy social life? In which case, that moment when the boat hits the wharf to unload its passengers, that moment in the dusk after work, that is the dialectical image. You feel the shudder radiating along the creaking wooden wharf. It goes way down the piles into the ocean floor. Softly.

And yet, we have to fight the temptation to fill the gaps and supply the links that Benjamin apparently failed to provide by attempting to reconcile the contradictions in which he left the dialectical image suspended. Such efforts would simply reduce Benjamin's thinking to the familiar and the plausible (Auerbach, 2007). It is to Weber's immense credit that he does justice to Benjamin's concepts and style in a writing that achieves an eloquence all of its own. The quotation below captures well the purpose and spirit of Weber's writing well and, as such, serves as a fitting end to this section:

Benjamin strips his reader of all assurance with tranquil assurance, drawing him into a dizzying whirl with a hard-headed enthusiasm that pulls out all the stops and then suddenly stops short, interrupting abruptly to demand an accounting. The promise of never granted luck shimmers through his writings, casting its glow over his name, in order then to slip from the outstretched hands of the reader. All that remains is its trace as mournful script. As empty as only allegory can be, the reader – especially one who, according to a tried and tested model, has sought to distil concepts or just to take the text at its word – leaves the stage: the contradictions and inconsistencies that result pose a formidable challenge that even the dialectic can hardly resolve in a fruitful manner. And yet the reader who has been touched by these texts knows, in the words of Beckett's Hamm, that the ball is in his court: *A moi de jouer.* (297)

What color is the sacred?

Business as usual led step by wretched step to terror as usual. (223)

Style is to the writer what color is to the painter, Proust's insistent point being that this art, working through layers of color and light, achieves its revelatory power through indirection and never by means of conscious confrontation, because the real treasure is inaccessible to the intellect. (45; emphasis in original)

If style is an important issue for Weber, for Taussig it becomes the key distinguishing characteristic. The back cover of the book carries the rather amusing endorsement by *Publishers Weekly*: 'If Hunter S. Thompson had been trained by Boas in anthropology, Engels in Economics and Arendt in philosophy, he might write something like Taussig'. Old friends resurface in this book. Burroughs, Proust and Benjamin are the most prominent authors. Benjamin has a chapter entirely devoted to him (chapter 12: 'The Red Butterfly'); Proust even gets a whole section of the book (part 3: 'Color in Proust', 175-213). The Benjamin chapter concerns his stay on the island of Ibiza in the summers of 1932 and 1933 and his encounter with the French painter Jean Selz who 'wants us to remember his friend from Ibiza. He wants us to remember his prose as *that truly unique medium*, he says, in which poetry and the science of history merge as truth of the world' (76; emphasis in original). The chapter also contains some nice pictures of Benjamin on the beach with Selz and in a lobster boat off Ibiza. Taussig's own island stay – Christmas 2004, spent in a lighthouse on a deserted island of the west coast of Spain – offers us another dialectical image:

Nature does not so much disappear as exist in layers of such histories, with each layer written across the one before so that the earlier layers continue to be visible in a smudged-out and sometimes surprising ways...Through the dense undergrowth, the spiraling, burrow-like paths of wild pigs went deeper into nowhere, the beginnings of time itself, while overhead the white lighthouse kept time at a standstill.⁵ Surrounded by sea, history surfaced as prehistory. Dialectical images such as these recast history as nature, the ideal as real. They come out of nowhere, it seems, as if by chance, making the present more present, the past more vivid, welling up within us as something alive. 'There I have been', you might almost say. Yet redemption can never be final because the gap between the old and the new can never be closed. Writing worth reading is built this way, writing being a continuous confrontation with the past that evoked it. (144)

For Taussig the dialectical image can affect the deepest layers of our being where habit reigns so that bodily dispositions become transferred to another register altogether: 'from homogenous empty time to 'time filled by the presence of the now' blasted out of the continuum of history' (199). Via convolute N, Taussig takes us back to Proust's notion of *awakening* as the recognition of something forgotten: 'Thus, in Proust, the importance of staking an entire life on life's supremely dialectical point of rupture: awakening (AP, N3a, 3) [...] The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian (AP, N4, 4)'.⁶ In fact, he sees Benjamin's writing as having 'Proust's fingerprints all over' (198). When Benjamin says in convolute N that 'the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again', Taussig sees this as an instance of the '*memoire involontaire* grafted onto a Marxist vision of world history and revolution'

5 Note the Benjaminian vocabulary in Taussig's description: 'To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought... It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest... it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process' (AP, N10a, 3).

6 Taussig's quote on pg. 199 actually contains two small errors. I have reproduced here the original quotes from Convolute N.

(*ibid.*). It parallels Proust's definition of reality as a montage of memories; a *now* overlaid by a *back then*. Taussig quotes directly from Proust's *In search of lost time* here: 'what we call reality is a certain connection between the immediate sensations and memories which envelop us simultaneously' (*ibid.*).

And yet, our everyday language makes it difficult for us to talk about reality that way; to actually see that reality. That is why in Proust writing style and critical method become indistinguishable. His method lies in *actualization*; writing as the production of reading. This actuality is one 'where consciousness shifts from the imagined to the perception of the cruel radiance of what is' (103). Actualization in Proust is an effect achieved by him having his particular style. The awareness at stake here involves the reader becoming aware of what he or she was already aware of without knowing it. What is evoked in words seems to exist not only on the page, but it seems to draw the reader in as well. The work as a whole is diffused with a visceral quality, 'an all-encompassing bodily disturbance' (207), creating a different sense of awareness. The most worked out example of creating such a different sense of awareness can be found in part two of the book, 'Color in the Colony' (77-174), which offers a 'restudy of early anthropology' (16). Good ethnographies, Taussig believes, can make the reader imagine and imbibe other ways of being and feel the difference from one's own way of being. We are taught to be aware differently in much the same way as when we first to learn to walk or swim; it requires a surfacing of the bodily unconscious. Taussig structures this section of the book around the juxtaposition of Malinowski's personal diary and his published ethnographies. In reading Malinowski's diary 'we are pitched into another sense of what makes the real real' (91). In the ethnographies, the body of the writer gets restored to 'what we might call Standard Western Subjectivity' (*ibid.*). The chapters making up this part are the most tightly written and offer a wonderful early history of the ethnographic method and thoughtful general reflections on doing fieldwork. Taussig also bemoans the self-imposed limitations and the lost possibilities in ethnographic work:

Like diary writing, novel reading was taboo in the sense that it was part of that Other existence, tugging for expression, wanting to breathe and be openly recognized as a legitimate part of ethnography and ethnographic writing. It would be equally disingenuous to assume that first comes ethnographic field-work and after that comes the writing of the ethnography. To the contrary, fieldwork always presupposes the writing of it and is immersed in writing, no less than Malinowski's diary immerses his being in the shifting colors of the sea and sky. What died, what was continuously dying, as I see it, was the possibility if not the actual temptation to create hybrid, avant-garde forms, both fictive and nonfictive, personal and impersonal, instead of stuffing the off-screen stuff into the incommensurable confines of the diary or into forbidden novel reading. (93)

This quotation brings us to the rather peculiar title of this book. As Taussig puts it, to ask 'what color is the sacred?' is to ask about connections 'and whether we have lost the language that could do that connecting for us...' (6):

Could Michel Leiris have had something like this in mind with his bizarre question that I paraphrase as What is the color of the sacred?... Here is what he said: 'If one of the most 'sacred' aims that man can set for himself is to acquire as exact an understanding of himself as possible, it seems desirable that each one, scrutinizing his memories with the greatest possible honesty, examine whether he can

discover there some sign permitting him to discern the *color* for him of the very notion of the sacred'.⁷ (191)

The book then is about sneaking past 'the watchful eye of the system that in categorizing holds you apart from reality' (65). It means having to come up 'with a way of thinking – which means a way of using words to tell a story – that will do an end-run around language so there can be some first contact with reality' (*ibid.*). For Taussig, 'to be good at not-knowing is the true knowing. Skilled revelation of skilled concealment is a wheel that spins without rest. The point is the effort *and* the failure' (207). He is fascinated by the 'unthought quality of thought, the automatic capacity a person has to relate shapes and sounds of words to what words mean' (186) and aims to locate a mode or style that expands and contracts that automaticity. Colour provides a key – Taussig refers to colour as the epitome of *polymorphous magical substance*⁸ (viz. chapter 9 with this title; also pages 47, 140, 181, 200) – in that it does not fit into the division of reality into subjects and objects. It has 'fallen through the cracks of Western self-making and the everyday sense as to the makeup of the world. Nobody could decide if color belonged to the subject or the object, or whether it was visual or corporeal' (174). It is therefore important to 'indulge the trickster quality of color'. It helps us 'to pass, as Engels puts it, "beyond the sphere of thought" (AP, N10a, 2)'. The aim of introducing a Benjaminian or Proustian sense of colour is not to give it a specific content (i.e. colour is really *this* or really like *that*). What matters to Taussig is speculation about the way we traditionally talk about colour and the relationship of such discourse to world history. The true aim then is to think about colour in such way 'that propels you into the image, [so] we might never think the same about thinking itself' (8).

As a careful reader of Proust and Benjamin, Taussig conceives of his book as 'an effort in human actuality' (103). Actualization in Taussig, no less than for Proust, is achieved through a particular style, at one point described as 'the Poetry of the join by means of which lies the possibility not of mastery but the mastery of nonmastery' (242). Many chapter titles have a strange poetic resonance: 'Where stones walk like men'; 'Color walks'; 'In the time of Lapis Lazuli'; 'Sailing through color'; 'Redeeming indigo'; 'Sex appeal of the inorganic'; 'An hour is not merely an hour'; 'Colored by weather'. Sometimes the effect of Taussig's poetic writing style is exhilarating; at other times it can be quite deadening as the text gets far too saturated (at least for this reader!). For example:

Is it not time for blue to exert its magic and sexuality, its fearsome impacts on snakes and potency, so as to undo that which would cast it as 'color', sans history, sans density, sans song? If it could

7 The quote is taken from a lecture to the College of Sociology, Paris, January 1938 and also functions as epigraph to the book.

8 For Taussig this is similar to the *mana* of Lévi-Strauss's which Marcel Mauss thought was the basis of all magic. He likens it to human stem cells, which have the potential to become any of the specialized cells of the body. But polymorphous magical substance concerns 'not the human body, but the body of the world' (41): 'It is like no substance we have ever seen or can imagine, more like a substance which is no substance, suspending laws of time and space where substance gives way to movement, manifesting itself in a myriad of changing forms' (*ibid.*).

penetrate an egg and make men cough blue, this beauty that is indigo, how much more likely is it to penetrate history as a silent symbol ensconced in a color chart? When will we cough blue? ... Equally strange is that our eyewitness all along here is called Colesworthy. Even as he was gazing down into indigo swirling in the vat in Bengal, the German chemists in Germany and London were fabricating color from coal. Coal's worthy indeed! (154)

'There is a tortured relationship here' reads the first sentence of the next paragraph. Indeed, but perhaps not in quite the sense Taussig intended. But it would be rather churlish to condemn Taussig for these excesses. As I quoted him above, 'the point is the effort *and* the failure'.

In order to do justice to Taussig (...and to Weber...and to Benjamin) I cannot simply seek to 'distil concepts or just to take the text at its word'. Because style is so important to all these authors I have quoted them generously; thus trying to give the reader a feel for the texture, depth, strangeness and sensuousness of their writing and thinking, and hopefully providing some hints as to how these combine in an attempt to interrupt our thinking. My own writing in this review perhaps has mirrored unintentionally the very different styles of Weber and Taussig – tranquil assurance and exuberant restlessness respectively – in the relevant sections. Such is the ability of style! In wrapping up this review I can offer no take-away concepts or easy applications for either of the books, but I hope to have revealed some of the lines of force running through them in a way that does justice to both books. No pulling it all together this time either then. Just a few more borrowed words which I believe capture the spirit of both books (and even this review):

I am coming to the end. All along it has been my heartfelt wish to allow color to change the way we see and hence the way we are made aware of the world at large as a body like the human body.... *Look! Look at color! Become aware!* is what I'm saying – Benjamin... crazy about it; Burroughs, it drips off the page; Proust, the same... Malinowski's kula, the same – yet we so rarely see color unless it hurts and offends us. Color passes us by in the same way in which we do not notice our own breathing until it stops, by which time it's a little late. This is puzzling. It suggests that we in the West have an unconscious engagement with the color world, to which our bodies even more than our eyes are connected, and it is this force and connection, really, rather than color itself, which has gotten me going as our planet heads into the manmade onslaught of global warming and the bodily unconscious forces another type of awareness on the species. (243; emphasis in original)

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