



ART  
RELIGION  
AMNESIA

THE ENCHANTMENTS OF CREDULITY

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ROUTLEDGE



# SEMIOSIS AND ITS (DIS)CONTENTS

## Two matters

### The mess of (the) matter

*By way of illustration* of the foregoing theses and corollaries, consider the three following images as a compound object with three faces or facets (Figures. 7.1–7.3) and, by looking through three juxtaposed images, foreground the problems (in this case the paradoxes and conundrums) being reckoned with in this excavation. The first two images incorporate brief texts and the force or import of each is essentially tied to these multimodal entities. One deals ostensibly with art, the other with belief. The third concerns a self-conscious use of an artwork in its *hygienic* and exhortatory functions, so as to *remedy or cure* an aberrant belief at a particular time (2010) and place (Western Poland).

The first image is from an advertisement circulating online in late summer 2012 of an exhibition of artists called *In Absentia*, at Art-O-Rama, Marseilles, France, mounted August 31–September 16, 2012. Its online announcement featured this 2011 work by L.G. Williams (Figure 7.1), a parody of a Roy Lichtenstein painting of 1961 entitled “I Can See the Whole Room ... and There’s Nobody in It!”<sup>1</sup>

The next is an illuminated double-sided notice board inserted in a brick-framed text facing both ways at the intersection of two streets (Baseline Avenue and 76th Street) at the East Boulder Baptist church, in Boulder, Colorado, on display in 2011.

What exactly is taking place in each image? What is a viewer/passersby – whether a member of the particular religious sect or not – to make of these fabrications?

Let’s begin with the second. In this tableau – of a type not uncommon in some parts of the United States<sup>2</sup> – you are specifically exhorted here to *not* trust (“lean on”) your *own* knowledge or intelligence (“understanding”). Instead you’re being urged to place (lean) that trust (a firm belief in some thing or some *one* not demonstrable by your own senses except by deferring to someone else’s presumed knowledge) – on an invisible or absent entity named “The Lord.” *Let this* (Baptist Business) “*Lord*” *do your thinking for you.*



FIGURE 7.1 I Can See The Whole Room! And There's No Art in It!, 2011. Copyright © LG Williams/The Estate of LG Williams™.

Which patently ignores the obvious – that you'd have to use your own mind to “trust” or even profess “faith” in the first place. But if you can't trust your own intelligence, then how could you use it to *entrust* your own understanding to this “Lord” entity? The presumption is that “leaning upon” your own intelligence (by implication imagined in this billboard as existing in its own right, prior to or distinct from its embodiment or expression) would likely result in your *falling over* that abstracted mentality. So it's to your advantage to lean on some *thing* that is presumed/believed/asserted as *being there* in the first place to lean upon, even if you can only *verify its being there by believing (trusting) it's actually there in the first place* (in such a case, demonstration or proof is not merely *in the pudding*: it *is* the pudding itself).

A self-justifying demonstration: the proof of what is believed is supported solely by the act of *avowing* belief; the actual *practice* of *believing*: by the belief itself, in other



FIGURE 7.2 East Boulder Baptist Church sign. Photograph taken by the author.

words. A common exhortation to believe in a phenomenon promoted as real by the authority vested in a human institution designed to promote belief in what cannot be accounted for except by acting/believing what is being promoted: taken “on faith” rather than demonstrable by (your) reason or intelligence or understanding. A trust justified by the authority of those human persons promoting the belief in a superhuman force or strong power, “trust” being an index of strength and power.<sup>3</sup>

A credulity which, as we shall see, is as old as Plato’s attempt to justify the artistry, the design and organization, of his ideal or utopian city or community by *denying* its own artistry or constructedness, situating the entrusting authority in belief in its (ideal) naturalness in those individuals holding power – a king or lord or aristocracy surely in itself a *sign* (index, symbol, expression, representation, embodiment, etc.) of divine favor (from Latin *favere*, to show kindness to). Like Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, who had to lean or depend upon the kindness of strangers to survive in a cruel world, we too must rely on the favor of the (i.e., *their*) lord. Pragmatically, one should depend or *lean* upon a cadre or class of rulers themselves entrusted with the task of *correctly* interpreting the “will” of the god (or gods); in a cosmos or universe claimed to be *its* (or *their*) divine creation.

The cosmo-spatial or metaphysical metaphor ostensified by the East Boulder Baptist church’s public signage is in fact quite *spectral*. The tableau’s legibility depends on accepting the juxtaposition and linkage between (what are distinguished

are inevitably political, moral, ethical, social, and economic matters. There have been many ways in which this conundrum has been engaged with historically, for these are hardly unique to our modernities.

In the case of Western religious traditions, the related artifactual problem of *translation* is central to any understanding of religiosity, as we will see below. In Western Christianity, whose sacred texts (or most of them) were in languages not native to Europe, the problem was and remains acute, but the scale and dimensions of the problem are no less present where the “other” language is one’s own in the distant past (ancient Greek to modern; Sanskrit to Hindi, ancient Hebrew or Aramaic to modern spoken variants; the Arabic of seventh-century Saudia to modern spoken Arabic, or to Persian, Turkish, etc.).

One of the central issues of concern here is precisely the orienting of understanding in diverse and apparently antithetical ways by semiotic practices or epistemological technologies conventionally gathered under the (modern, Western) denotations of “religion” and “art,” whose very distinction is the product of historical evolutions in semiotic strategies and tactics. Oriented, moreover, toward very particular social ends: the justification of the concept of the European nation-state and its citizen-enablers.

But let’s hold all this in abeyance for a while: what of the first image above (Figure 7.1)?

It seems to be ostensibly concerned with “*artistic*” rather than “*religious*” practice – and its staging of what is visible *and* what is invisible *as* art. Two things are immediately striking about the picture. First, the nature of what is proclaimed as being seen or recognizable *as* “art.” Meaning, in the case of what is (presumably) being *not* seen through the peep-hole held open by the finger of the viewer – namely, any (works of) “fine art,” that is, artwork as a kind of modern thing or type of marketable product or commodity. Just imagine! There’s no art, not a single artwork, in this whole place! There’s also no religion to be seen – but just because its not visible doesn’t mean (as we’ll see) it is not a force with palpable effects.

However, what is stated as *not visible* (to the looker) *as art* is of course the “whole room” (that is, that thing that is devoid of art; that has “*no art-work(s) in it*”): *the room or space itself* as an artifact (artwork/work of artistry) in its own right. The viewer is looking into the space without *seeing* the artifice of the made/built environment; the architecture *in which* no artwork is visible. Undressed or unadorned space; bare or *mere* space; an “empty” room. An artistry or artifice.

The emptiness of the room does *not* call attention in this image to what is visible as an instance of artistry *except ironically* – the presumed *point* of the captioned image of the artist (L.G. Williams). An evacuation of the space of art in favor of the (denied; overlooked) art of space. You can’t see the forest for the trees – that is, you can’t see the forest because there are only trees (or space) *in* “it,” so there must then not be any such *it* visible or palpable. What is called into attention is the indispensable role of the spectator in the carpentry of signification.

Several things here recall some of what was noted above about the multimodality and multifunctionality of semiosis or signification. In addition, there is a conundrum

or paradox bearing a similarity to what is avoided in the *conative* or exhortatory artifact of an ecclesiastical *syllepsis*. In both cases, what is being staged is a lack of understanding or a denial of the artistry that underpin what is being proclaimed. *Both* practices are sylleptic, and each in its own way is *zeugmatic* – juxtaposing (conventionally) appropriate and inappropriate entities or phenomena.

But where exactly was the “religion” (in)visible in that room, but not, as implied earlier, any less palpable? To contend with that implication, we need to perambulate over to a third image and the intriguing remarks of its patron and sponsor, a parish priest in the small western Polish town of Swiebodzin, the Reverend Sylwester Zawadzki. The object in question is the new (2010) 108-foot statue of Christ, even taller (with its crown on) than the famous statue of Christ with outstretched arms overlooking Rio de Janeiro (Figure 7.3).<sup>8</sup>



FIGURE 7.3 Colossal Christ Statue, Swiebodzin, Poland. Photograph taken by the author.

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