

# What Do Pictures Want?

The Lives and Loves of Images

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Empire follows Art, and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose.

WILLIAM BLAKE, *Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses* (ca. 1798–1809)

If colonial imperialism made . . . primitive objects physically accessible, they could have little aesthetic interest until the new formal conceptions arose. But these formal conceptions could be relevant to primitive art only when charged with the new valuations of the instinctive, the natural, the mythical as the essentially human. . . . By a remarkable process the arts of subjugated backward peoples, discovered by Europeans in conquering the world, became aesthetic norms to those who renounced it.

MEYER SCHAPIRO, "Nature of Abstract Art" (1937)

What is the relation of art to empire? Was Sir Joshua Reynolds right in thinking that art follows empire, the way camp followers have always fawned upon the powerful? Or did Blake have it right when he wrote in the margins of Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* that art plays the leading role, and empire follows? Needless to say, I side with Blake, though I don't think that his view is necessarily a comforting one for artists. "Up, make us gods to go before us" is the call for an artist (Aaron) to lead the way into a Promised Land to be conquered and colonized. So if empire follows art, that does not guarantee that it leads in the right direction.

But in order to show why Blake is right about the priority of art to empire, we need to situate the matter of "art" within a general (that is, imperial) reflection on the problem of objecthood—including, but not exhausted by,

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art objects. What are the material and (if you will) nonmaterial "objects" of empire? What kinds of objects do empires produce, depend on, and desire? What kinds of objects do they abhor and attempt to destroy or neutralize? What happens to objects when they undergo a "worlding" in their circulation, moving across frontiers, flowing from one part of the globe to another? Does this produce, to use theorist Arjun Appadurai's phrase, a "social life of things,"<sup>1</sup> and are there other forms of animism in imperial objects? What would it mean to think of empire in terms of a broad range of objects and object types? What are the objectives of these objects, their role in constituting forms of objectivity and object lessons?

Finally, I want to discuss three specific kinds of objects that we have encountered before, and that seem endemic to the discourses of imperialism and colonialism: totems, fetishes, and idols. These are, I will argue, productions of colonial discourse, and are often identified as the "bad objects" of empire, the things that produce ambivalence and need to be neutralized, merely tolerated, or destroyed. They are also things—often art objects—that seem (truly or falsely) to "come alive" in the colonial encounter, implying the animation of inanimate objects. One aim of this chapter, then, is to see how the history and logic of empire might be seen through, and beyond, these objects.

But I am equally interested in how the imperial construction of objects has produced concepts of objecthood that play a central role in aesthetics and particularly the concept of the *art object* as such—the process by which (as art historian Meyer Schapiro put it) "the arts of subjugated backward peoples . . . became aesthetic norms" for modern cultures.<sup>2</sup> The title of this chapter plays upon "Art and Objecthood," art critic Michael Fried's classic essay that defines in so many ways the transition from modernist to post-

1. See Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

2. For more on these matters, see my essay, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5–34.

3. Perhaps the most famous instance of the "coming home" of the colonial categories of objecthood is the application of fetishism to modern art, first by Meyer Schapiro in his classic essay on abstraction, and later by the many theorists of postmodernism who have placed the critique, transvaluation, and appropriation of fetishism into an entire category of contemporary artistic practice (see discussion of Hal Foster in chapter 5 above). See Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Braziller, 1978),

modernist art, especially in the United States.<sup>4</sup> I evoke Fried's essay in order to tap some of its dialectical and polemical dynamics, especially its effort to stage "objecthood" not merely as a general, neutral category into which all art objects may be placed as a subset, but as a category that *opposes* the art object with a new set of pseudoartistic objects (generally labeled as Minimalist or Literalist or Theatrical). Fried's essay, in short, could have been entitled "Art versus Objecthood." For Fried, art (especially modernist art) is precisely the kind of thing that "defeats" objecthood. "There is a war going on," he says, "between theater and modernist painting" (160), between the "literal object" of the minimalists and the "pictorial" aesthetics of the modernists. For Fried, modernist art is precisely the aesthetic that redeems the literal materiality of things, their mere "presence" as things ready to hand, and elevates them to a "presentness," an immanent, atemporal condition that is equivalent to a state of grace.

This division between art objects and mere, unredeemed objecthood, between art and nonart, has a deep connection, I want to argue, with the rhetoric of empire and colonization. It is not merely that notions of art arise spontaneously within a culture and then are tested or contested when that culture is involved in an imperial or colonial encounter. The very notion of art as a distinctive category of objects (and the category of objecthood more generally) is forged in the colonial encounter. To put the point in the most emphatic terms, my claim is that both art and objecthood are imperial (and imperious) categories, and that aesthetics as a quasi science of artistic judgment is a separation of the redeemed from the damned, the purified from the corrupt and the degraded object. As an imperial practice, aesthetics enlists all the rhetorics of religion, morality, and progressive modernity to pass judgment on the "bad objects" that inevitably come into view in a colonial encounter.<sup>5</sup> Although imperialism generally poses itself as a magisterial and objective viewpoint in which objects of all sorts are cat-

4. Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" first appeared in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12–23, and has now been reprinted with extensive annotations, along with Fried's other essays from the sixties and seventies, in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 146–72.

5. By "bad object" I of course do not mean simply "bad" in a straightforward moral sense, but "bad" in the sense of producing a disturbance, uncertainty, and ambivalence in a subject. This term is borrowed from object-relations theory, especially as elaborated by Melanie Klein (see below). See also J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 278–81.

alogued, preserved, and arranged in rational order, it is also centrally constituted by acts of judgment, dialectics of taste that separate the wheat from the chaff. This is why the phrase "primitive art" has never been easy to pronounce. Either it is an oxymoron, referring to a phase of object making that is "before the era of art" (as Hans Belting puts it), or it is offensive to a pluralist sensibility that wants to find art (understood as the nonprimitive) in every manifestation of human culture.

The most obvious symptom of imperial rhetoric in Fried's "Art and Objecthood" is the opening epigraph from Perry Miller which quotes seventeenth-century Puritan Jonathan Edwards on the perception of "a new world . . . freshly created" in every moment: "it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed. The abiding assurance is that 'we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.'"<sup>6</sup> This doctrine of the "new world" and perpetual re-creation is precisely the framework in which Fried wants to situate the redemptive experience of "presentness" and "grace" in the authentic work of art. But of course it is also a replaying of that moment in New England when the New World was (mis)perceived as an empty, virgin wilderness, as pure as the day it was created, ripe for colonization by the American Adam.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to be taken, however, as some kind of moralistic or political judgment on Fried's rhetoric, as if it were merely a repetition of nakedly imperialist gestures. My point is rather that the whole language of aesthetic judgment, especially of the distinction between art and objecthood, is already saturated with colonial discourse. This is not a fact to be lamented or overcome but to be understood. The clearest sign that the discourse is inevitable is the way the accusation of "anthropomorphism" comes up on both sides of the debate between Fried and the minimalists. Fried quotes Donald Judd's critique of the gestural, "part by part" welded sculpture of David Smith and Anthony Caro: "a beam thrusts; a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image."<sup>8</sup> Against this, the minimalists argued for the values of "wholeness, single-

6. Perry Miller, quoted in Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 148.

7. I echo here the title of R. W. B. Lewis's classic study, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

8. Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 150.

ness, and indivisibility," the aesthetic of the "Specific Object" that would renounce all the anthropomorphic gestures of modernist painting and sculpture. But when Fried turns to his attack on the minimalists, he turns the accusation of anthropomorphism against them: "a kind of latent or hidden . . . anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice" (157). It is manifested by the sense that minimalist forms are like "surrogate person[s]," that the experience of their presence is "not . . . unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another *person*"; that the size of the works "compares fairly closely with the human body"; and that the "hollowness . . . of most literalist work—the quality of having an *inside*—is almost blatantly anthropomorphic" (156).

Both modernist art and minimalist objecthood, then, stand accused of anthropomorphism, the one for being gestural, the other for being hollow and theatrical. (Hollowness is, of course, one of the traditional indictments of idolatry, along with theatrical illusion, mere brute materiality, and false anthropomorphizing of inanimate objects.) The interesting thing about this debate now is not which side was right, but why the charge of anthropomorphism was so easily available to both sides. The personified (or merely animated) object is, as we have seen, the occasion of deep anxiety and disavowal in aesthetics. We want works of art to have "lives of their own," but we also want to contain and regulate that life, to avoid taking it literally, and to be sure that our own art objects are purified of the taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes. The difficulty of containing the lives of images and the incorrigibility of the question, what do pictures want? are expressed in this ambivalence about anthropomorphism, the encounter with the object-as-Other. What follows is an effort to trace the evolution of the object-as-Other in the encounters with objects of the Other.

## Empire and Objecthood

The age of imperialism is over, and therefore it is time to talk about empire. The age of disembodied, immaterial virtuality and cyberspace is upon us, and therefore we are compelled to think about material objects. The end of imperialism and the dematerialization of objects are not merely parallel or coincidental events but deeply implicated with one another. Perhaps they are even the same thing seen from two different angles. Imperialism, we are

told, has been replaced in our time by "globalization," a matrix of circulation and flows of information without a center, determinate location, or singular figurehead. (I always like to remind people, however, of Alan Sekula's cagey observation that the speed of actual commodity circulation on this planet is today almost exactly the same as it was in 1900.)<sup>9</sup> Globalization has no emperor, no capital, and no structure except for the endless labyrinths of corporate mergers, government bureaucracies, and the ever-proliferating nongovernmental organizations. It is a rhizome of networks, webs, and mediascapes where the buck never stops, the telephone trees never stop growing, and no one is in charge. A smiling pretender occupies the most powerful office in the world, a genial avatar of interlocking corporate interests such as weapons, biopower, and energy, and of a pervasive ideology of neoliberalism (also known as "compassionate conservatism") that installs "democracy" and "freedom" as the alibis for increasingly unregulated capitalism and U.S. military adventurism. In this New World Order, freedom means the freedom of commodities (but not of human bodies) to circulate freely across borders, and democracy means an infinite proliferation of consumer choices accompanied by an increasingly narrow range of political choices. Before we celebrate the demise of imperialism, then, we had better reflect on the forms of empire that have replaced it. Before we sail off into the disembodied utopia of the World Wide Web, we had better ask ourselves what things we will have to leave behind, and what the consequences will be for the real bodies and physical objects that remain.

The end of imperialism and the dematerialization of the object have both generated compensatory forms of nostalgia for the good old days of colonialism. The British film industry provides a rose-tinted window into Victorian life at the apogee of the empire (a tactic it has resorted to since the 1930s, when it was seen as the only way to compete with Hollywood's cinematic imperialism; the theory was that the British film industry would have a world market waiting for its products, allowing it to compete with Hollywood's favorable home profit margins).<sup>10</sup> The National Trust provides the material settings: fashions, furniture, country houses and castles, gardens,

9. See Alan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art; Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995), 50, for Sekula's blistering critique of "the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphysical construct, 'cyberspace,' and the corollary myth of 'instantaneous' contact between distant spaces. . . . Large-scale material flows remain intractable."

10. My thanks to Tom Gunning for this information.

artifacts, obsolete scientific instruments, early photographs and bric-a-brac supply the Merchant-Ivory productions with lavishly detailed resources for periodizing nostalgia. American filmmakers compensate for the end of imperialism with fantasies of futuristic or archaic empires—the Evil Empire of *Star Wars*, the Roman revival of *Gladiator*, the cybernetic empire of *The Matrix*, or the lost empire of Disney's *Atlantis*—all featuring the latest in special effects and digital imaging. Like that period in popular culture after World War II when American cinema reflected the emergence of Pax Americana with spectacles of Egypt, Rome, and the golden age (in innumerable pirate movies) of the maritime empires, cinema at the turn of the twenty-first century replays the imperial spectacle in its heightened, virtual mode, with more garish violence and special effects than ever before.

Meanwhile, among scholars and intellectuals, the so-called postcolonial era has produced anything but a farewell to the imperial epoch. From Eric Hobsbawm's classic studies, to Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century*, a magisterial survey of imperial dialectics from the early modern period to the present, to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, to Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, the New World Order of our time has reflected obsessively on the "old word order" of imperialism. Historical and theoretical study of imperialism has become a growth industry in the academy. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt go so far as to argue that the demise of imperialism is also the birth of "empire" as a fully articulated concept and reality. "Our basic hypothesis," say Hardt and Negri,

*is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire. . . . In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow.<sup>11</sup>*

I am not sure we should accept Hardt and Negri's rather utopian picture of the postmodern and postcolonial "Empire" with a capital E. What I find

11. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii–xiii.

interesting about it is its insistence on the continued, in fact heightened, importance of empire as a contemporary concept, and its linkage of empire to the disappearance of the traditional imperialist objects—real territories, fixed locations of sovereignty, and (implicitly) the chief object of empire, the figure of the emperor as godlike ruler of the world. It is also critical to Hardt and Negri's picture of empire that the new objects of empire are described as "national and international organisms," a vitalist metaphor now extended to such objects as corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and nation-states.

If the passing of imperialism has spawned an obsession with empire, the triumph of virtuality and the dematerialized image is accompanied by an unprecedented fascination with material things. I'm thinking here not just of the rampant forms of materialism in contemporary consumer culture, the elephantine proportions of SUVs and suburban chateaux, but the ways in which the visceral reality of the body, the infinite archive of unrecyclable (but sometimes collectible) waste products, the plethora of obsolete gadgets, are filling up the world as if it were one giant junkyard. Contemporary art installations sometimes look as if they were sets for *Bartertown* in the *Road Warrior* trilogy, and the display of trash, of "formless" assemblages of materials, has become an aesthetic category in its own right.<sup>12</sup> The mixed-media collage, the found object, and the readymade occupy center stage in contemporary art production, while optically and pictorially oriented modes such as abstract painting have moved to a distinctly minor position.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, objecthood has also moved to the forefront of scholarly labor. "These days," as Bill Brown points out in his introduction to "Things," a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, "you can read books on the pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the banana, the chair, the potato, the bowler hat. These days, history can unabashedly begin with things and with the senses by which we apprehend them; like a modernist poem, it begins in the street, with the smell of frying oil, shag tobacco and unwashed beer glasses."<sup>14</sup>

12. The College Art Association meeting of February 2001 included "Trash," a session organized by Lisa Wainwright, dealing with the theory of the Found Object. See chapter 5 of the present text. Also of interest is the *Informe* exhibition at the Beaubourg Museum in Paris, curated by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss in 1996. See *L'informe: mode d'emploi* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1996), which traces the pedigree of this aesthetic in surrealism.

13. See chapters 5 and 11 for more on these matters.

14. Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," introduction to "Things," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 2.

The new objecthood is not merely a woolgathering movement toward empiricism and materialism, or a spin-off of the new historicist love of detail and anecdote, but a return to fundamental theoretical reflection on the constitution of material objects, as if our virtual age were compelling us to start all over with the ontology of things, renewing Heidegger's obsessive questions about the Being of beings.<sup>15</sup> "Matter" seems to "matter" in a newly vivid and urgent way. Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*, Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*, Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* are among the more prominent contributions to this revival, and we could all enumerate, I'm sure, the ways in which material culture is reasserting itself as a discipline in new journals, conferences, and academic programs. Fried's "Art and Objecthood" returns, ironically enough, in a world where objecthood seems to have decisively triumphed over what Fried understood to be art—that is, abstract painting and sculpture, as epitomized by David Smith, Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella. Fried's major complaint about minimalist objecthood—aside from its anthropomorphism—was that it involved the display of merely literal, physical objects like cubes and slabs, unredeemed by any gestures of virtuality or figuration, any dematerialization by the work of fantasy or imagination. The imperative of the modernist art object, by contrast, was "that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood through the medium of shape."<sup>16</sup> It's as if the moment when the United States emerged as the dominant world power, and the moment when it appropriated the high modernist strategies of abstract art, is countered, dialectically, by an artistic movement that refuses virtuality and opticality and repudiates all the modernist strategies for redeeming the brute materiality of the art object, in favor of an affirmation of thingness and objecthood.<sup>17</sup>

The art of empire has to be seen, then, in its relations to a larger world of objects and objecthood. For one thing, the notion of art itself, in its traditional sense as comprising the "arts and sciences"—all the crafts, skills,

15. For Heidegger's taxonomy of things, see Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 15–88. For an especially brilliant discussion of what might be called "the iconology of matter," see Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

16. Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 153.

17. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), on the transfer of modernism from Europe to the United States after World War II.

and technologies that make imperialism possible—makes art a synecdoche for a much wider range of things—not just works of art proper but weapons, bodies, architecture, instruments, ships, commodities, raw materials, animals, monuments, mechanisms, paintings, statues, uniforms, fossils—the whole Borges archive of empire, which (as you will recall) begins with “things owned by the emperor”—that is to say, with absolutely everything. For that is what the concept of empire is really about. It is a name for the total domination of material things and people, linked (potentially) with totalitarianism, with “absolute dominion,” the utopian unification of the human species and the world it inhabits; or the dystopian spectacle of total domination, the oppression and suffering of vast populations, the reduction of human life to a “bare life” for the great masses of people.<sup>18</sup> Empire is thus an object of radical ambivalence, perfecting the arts of mass death and destruction, conquest, and enslavement of whole populations while also producing the great monuments of civilization along with notions of universal law, human rights, and global harmony. Blake is not just a “prophet against empire” but a prophet of a positive ideal of “empire” figured by the lost civilization of Atlantis or the heavenly city of Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* has been criticized from the left wing mainly because it paints too rosy a picture of the utopian possibilities lurking in the intricate webs of globalization.<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin’s remark that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”<sup>21</sup> applies equally well to imperialism.

Objects arise as the figures in the landscape of empire; narratives and actions put them in motion. The caravels of Vasco da Gama, the triremes of Pericles, the Yankee clippers, Nelson’s *Fighting Temeraire*, Darwin’s *Beagle*, Cook’s *Discovery*, along with all their cargoes (spices, sugar, breadfruit, tobacco, silver, porcelain, gold, maps, sextants, cutlasses, cannons, coins, jewelry, works of art), flow through the spectacle of empire in the rearview

18. On “bare life,” see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

19. Blake refers to “the Golden world / An ancient palace, archetype of mighty Empires, / . . . built in the forest of God,” in “America: A Prophecy” (1793). In *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 54.

20. See Timothy Brennan, “The Empire’s New Clothes,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Winter 2003): 337–67.

21. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 256.

mirror of history. We differentiate these formations, of course. We insist that “empire proper” is a relatively recent historical formation, probably a modern one, and probably best exemplified by Great Britain. Rome, Athens, Holland, and China are radically different forms of empire, so different that we probably need to put the word in quotation marks for some of them. But the thing that unites (while differentiating) all forms of empire is the brute necessity of objects, the multitude of things that need to be in place for an empire to even be conceivable—tools, instruments, machines, commodities.

That is why an empire requires not just a lot of stuff, but what Michel Foucault called an “order of things,” an epistemic field that produces a sense of the kinds of objects, the logic of their speciation, their taxonomy. Empire requires and produces, in a word, objecthood, and along with it a discourse of objectivity. All these it then mobilizes around an ideal object, an objective or goal, which motivates the imperial quest, gives it a purpose and life of its own. Men did not (usually) make empires for the sake of empire. They have always had clear (if somewhat contradictory) objectives in mind. As the Earl of Arundel put it when he floated the fantasy of colonizing Madagascar in the seventeenth century, our objectives are the “propagation of the Christian Religion, and the prosecution of the Eastern Traffic.”<sup>22</sup> Globalization does not usually announce its objectives as the maximization of profit and the exploitation of an increasingly oppressed working class, but as the spread of prosperity and democracy, by way of what Noam Chomsky calls “a religious faith in the infallibility of the unregulated market.”<sup>23</sup> We may think that the religious objective is merely ideology or propaganda, but that makes it no less powerful and deterministic in the course of empire. God and money, the ultimate “Big Object” and the many little objects of desire, coalesce to form the object choice of empire. And when the empire declines and falls, as it inevitably must, it leaves behind nothing but objects—relics and ruins, inscriptions and monuments—which are invariably interpreted as ironic “object lessons” for succeeding empires. “Look on ye mighty and despair” is the inscription

22. Ernest Gilman, “Madagascar on My Mind: The Earl of Arundel and the Arts of Colonization,” in *Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race, Empire in Renaissance England*, by Peter Erickson and Clark Hulse (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 284–314.

23. Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), p. 8.

Shelley reads on the colossal ruined statue of Ozymandias, king of kings. In the golden era of the British Empire, Volney's *Ruins of Empire* and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* were familiar classics as Britons pondered their own place in the *translatio imperii*, the transfer of empire from East to West, and meditated on the object lessons left by their predecessors.

### Objects and Things

Objects, objectives, object lessons, and objecthood put things into circulation within a total system. "Things" themselves, on the other hand, have a habit of breaking out of the circuit, shattering the matrix of virtual objects and imaginary objectives. I invoke here a dialectical concept (which is also a familiar, vernacular distinction) between the *object* and the *thing*.<sup>24</sup> Objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template, a description, a use or function, a history, a science. Things, on the other hand, are simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague. A thing appears as a stand-in when you have forgotten the name of an object. As Bill Brown reminds us, we say "Hand me that thing over there, the one next to that green thing" when we are suffering cognitive object loss. So things play the role of a raw material, an amorphous, shapeless, brute materiality awaiting organization by a system of objects. Or they figure the excess, the detritus and waste when an object becomes useless, obsolete, extinct, or (conversely) when it takes on the surplus of aesthetic or spiritual value, the *je ne sais quoi* of beauty, the fetishism that animates the commodity, the "wild thing" or "sweet thang" or "Black Thing" that you wouldn't understand. The thing appears as the nameless figure of the Real that cannot be perceived or represented. When it takes on a single, recognizable face, a stable image, it becomes an object; when it destabilizes, or flickers in the dialectics of the multistable image, it becomes a hybrid thing (like the duck-rabbit) that requires more than one name, more than one identity. The thing is invisible, blurry, or illegible to the subject. It signals the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls "a metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly,

24. See Brown, "Thing Theory," for an especially subtle analysis of this distinction.

a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up toward our superficial knowledge."<sup>25</sup>

I want to draw a distinction here between objectivity, understood as the somewhat detached, skeptical attitude associated with scientific research, and "objectivism," the conviction that we do possess, or will in due course, a complete and total account of objects, an exhaustive, eternally comprehensive description of the "given."<sup>26</sup> Both objectivity and objectivism are protoimperialist formations. Objectivity is an essential component of that open, curious, and unresolved frame of mind that makes the encounter with novel, alien realities possible and desirable—surely a requirement of any successful colonial venture. Objectivism is the ideological parody of objectivity, and tends toward self-assurance and certainty about the sovereign subject's grip on the real. Objectivism is the fantasy of what Rousseau called the "sovereign subject," a picture of the beholder as imperial, imperious consciousness, capable of surveying and ordering the entire object world. The gap between objectivism and objectivity might be thought of, then, as the moment when the "thing" makes its appearance. It is the moment of uncertainty and liminality where ambivalence about objects arises.

I want to make this distinction in order to head off any notion that objectivity can or should be abandoned in favor of some form of subjective relativism. Objectivity is one of the most important and durable achievements of imperial civilizations (along with notions of universality and the species being of the human race) and will survive no matter how firmly we might reject the more odious features of imperialism. Notions of subjectivity and relativism, in fact, are part of the discourse of imperial objectiv-

25. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), 245. The sardine can makes its appearance in Jacques Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1981), 95.

26. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): "Objectivism constitutes the social world as a spectacle presented to an observer who takes up a point of view on the action, who stands back so as to observe it and, transferring into the object the principles of his relation to the object, conceives of it as a totality intended for cognition alone, in which all interactions are reduced to symbolic exchanges. The point of view is the one afforded by high positions in the social structure, from which the social world appears as a representation . . ." (96). See Robert Nelson's application of this concept to art history in "The Map of Art History," *Art Bulletin* 79 (1997): 37; also Stephen Shapin's *A Social History of Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) on the "Christian gentleman" as the figure of objectivity, and the implicit exclusion of savages, women, and the "lower orders" from the discourse of truth.



ity, not antithetical to it. Relativism only makes sense to someone who understands that there are radically different forms of subjectivity in the world, and this understanding can only come to someone who knows that there are other cultures, other societies and politics, and other kinds of objects in the world.

### Idol/Fetish/Totem

Among the many kinds of objects that come within the purview of imperial objectivity are some that we might call bad objects, or objects of the Other. I'm loosely adapting psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's notion of the split "part-object," more precisely, "imagos, which are a phantastically distorted picture of the real objects upon which they are based."<sup>27</sup> Bad objects, then, are not simply bad in some straightforward moral sense. They are objects of ambivalence and anxiety that can be associated with fascination as easily as with aversion.

Bad objects are not, at least to start with, the commodities (spices, gold, sugar, tobacco) that lure colonial expeditions, nor the symbolic gifts that are exchanged between emperors<sup>28</sup> to impress the recipient with the donor's wealth and refinement. Instead, these are objects generally seen as worthless or disgusting from the imperial perspective, but which are understood to be of great and no doubt excessive value to the colonial Other.<sup>29</sup> These objects usually have some kind of religious or magical aura and a living, animated character, which is seen from the objective imperial perspective as the product of merely subjective and superstitious beliefs. Although these objects are given many different names in the languages of colonized peoples, I want to focus on three categories of objects that have had a remarkably durable life in the history of European imperialism, and that have a further life in imperialism's picture of its own "proper" objects, especially its works of art. The names of these objects are fetishes, idols, and totems, terms which are often confused with one another or given very special meanings

27. Melanie Klein, quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 188.

28. Tony Cutler's "The Empire of Things" is an unpublished book manuscript about the symbolic objects that passed between Byzantine and Islamic emperors, but some of the essential points are made in Cutler's article "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 247-78.

29. See chapter 4 for more on the over- and underestimation of the image of the Other.

in technical discussions—theology, anthropology, economic theory, and psychoanalysis immediately come to mind—but have never, to my knowledge, been subjected to systematic comparison and differentiation.

These three objects are also exactly the sort of things that tend to throw the distinction between objectivity and objectivism into crisis. They are uncanny things that we should be able to dismiss as naive, superstitious objects of primitive subjectivities, but which at the same time awaken a certain suspicion or doubt about the reliability of our own categories. We know that the voodoo doll impaled with pins cannot really hurt us; its power is totally psychological and depends on the gullibility of a believer, not on any real forces in the real, objective world. And yet we hesitate to dismiss it outright.<sup>30</sup> The statue of the Virgin Mary does not really weep, but the staunchest unbeliever will hesitate to desecrate her image. The child's doll cannot really feel pain, but the wise parent will refrain from abusing or destroying this object out of respect for the child's feelings. One rather benign construction of the bad object, then, would be to call it the "transitional object" of the Other, in D. W. Winnicott's sense of the object of imaginative play that helps to unfold cognitive and moral sentiments.<sup>31</sup>

Both the history and logic of empire can be, in a sense, "told" by the triad of the idol, fetish, and totem. Idols correspond to the old territorial form of imperialism that moves by conquest and colonization, physically occupying someone else's lands and either enslaving or displacing the inhabitants. The idol has two functions in this process: on the one hand, it is a territorial marker to be erected or destroyed, as with the Baalim of nomadic tribes, a god of the place.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, it is the figurehead or image that "goes before" the conquering colonizers. When the emperor himself plays the role of a god, and his image is circulated in statues and coins, becoming the center of a cult, then imperial idolatry in its classic, Roman form is achieved.<sup>33</sup> As symbols or actual incarnations of a god, idols are the most powerful of imperial objects, presenting the greatest dangers

30. See Bruno Latour, "Notes Toward an Anthropology of the Iconoclastic Gesture," *Science in Context* 10 (1997): 63-83, for an excellent account of iconoclastic hesitation in the face of the sacred object.

31. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971).

32. See my discussion of the Baalim as gods of the place or *genius loci* in "Holy Landscape," in Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed., 277.

33. I'm grateful to my colleague Richard Neer for his help with questions about the cult of the Roman emperor.

and making the greatest demands. Idols characteristically want a human sacrifice, and the punishment for idolatry is death. Not every idolatrous people is, of course, imperialist. In principle, a tiny tribal unit could worship idols. The consolidation of idolatry into an imperial imaginary comes, I suspect, with the rise of monotheism, coupled with sufficient technical resources to give it military force. Either the empire is ruled by a god, a living idol, or the empire sets its face against idolatry in all its local forms and makes iconoclasm a central feature of colonial conquest. The book of Numbers puts this doctrine in the most emphatic terms: "When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places" (33:52-53). Ironically enough, this phase of imperialism corresponds to what economist Joseph Schumpeter calls "an *objectless* disposition on the part of a state to unlimited forcible expansion" (emphasis mine). A warrior culture plus an infinitely voracious and bloodthirsty deity who will tolerate no other gods before him and demand destruction of all idols is the formula for empire without limits, empire for the hell of it, a variation that Schumpeter traces from the Assyrians and Egyptians right down to Louis XIV.<sup>34</sup>

Fetishism, as anthropologist William Pietz has shown, is a much later development, emerging in early modern Europe as a buzzword among the mercantilist, seafaring empires of Holland, Portugal, Genoa, and the seventeenth-century phase of the British Empire. The word *fetish* comes from the Portuguese, and means simply a "made thing" (compare with *fac-ture*).<sup>35</sup> The typical European attitude toward fetishes is a complex mixture of aversion and fascination. Sometimes they were regarded as native deities

34. See Joseph Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes* (New York: A. M. Kelley 1951), 7.  
35. William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish," pts. 1-3: *Res* 9 (Spring 1985): 5-47; 13 (Spring 1987): 23-45; and 16 (Autumn 1988): 105-23. In contrast with the all-powerful image of the idol, fetishism (or "making fetish") treats the object as a prop in a ritual performance rather than a free-standing, self-authorizing thing. Cf. David Simpson's *Fetishism and Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982), on Herman Melville's descriptions of the fragility and ephemerality of sacred objects in Polynesia—holy one minute, on the trash heap the next. Fetishism, Pietz argues, refers originally to the sacred objects and rituals of West Africa encountered by Portuguese sailors, and fetish objects were used by Africans in a variety of ways: as power objects, talismans, medicinal charms, and commemoration devices to record important events such as marriages, deaths, and contractual agreements. Fetishism rapidly became a term of art in the African trade, and the trinkets and gadgets that the Europeans brought to Africa also took on the name of fetishes.

and equated with idols, but more often they were regarded as less important and powerful than idols, and were seen as connected to the private interests of individuals. Fetishes were almost invariably regarded with contempt as crude, inert, smelly, obscene, basely material objects that could only acquire magical power in an incredibly backward, primitive, and savage mind. A contrast is sometimes made between the idol, which is a relatively refined iconic symbol of a deity, and the fetish, regarded not as symbolic but as the place of the real presence of the animating spirit; hence fetishism has often been equated with crude materialism, in contrast with the relative refinement and sophistication of idolatry.<sup>36</sup> For the Protestant empires, the idolatry of the savages was readily associated with the Roman Catholic empires, so fetishism immediately became associated with idolatry and the holy crusade against popery, right alongside the missionary effort to stamp out heathen idolatry all over the world. Nevertheless, European traders to Africa found it necessary to tolerate the fetishes, and even to accept their social and cultural currency among the tribes they encountered. Swearing an oath on a fetish object, driving a nail into a power figure in order to commemorate an agreement, was often the only way to secure a bargain. Given this background in commerce, it seems only appropriate that when Marx looked about for a figure to define the magical character of Western, capitalist commodities, he adopted the fetish character as the appropriate figure for our rationalized and objective measures of exchange value.

Totems, finally, are the latest in the sequence of objects of the Other, emerging in the nineteenth century, mainly in the writings of anthropologists about North America and the South Pacific. Less threatening than idols, less offensive than fetishes, totems are generally natural objects or their representations, and they rarely have been seen as possessing godlike powers. They are, rather, "identity" objects associated with tribes or clans, and individual tribal members occasionally serve as tutelary or guardian spirits. The word *totem* comes, as Claude Lévi-Strauss notes, "from the Ojibwa, an Algonquin language of the region to the north of the Great Lakes of North America,"<sup>37</sup> and it is usually translated as equivalent to the expression, "He is a relative of mine." Of all the imperial objects, totems are

36. See my essay, "The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm," in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), for more on this distinction.

37. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 18.

the most benign. While idolatry and fetishism were generally condemned as obscene, perverse, demonic belief systems to be stamped out, totemism usually has been characterized as a kind of childish naïveté, based on an innocent oneness with nature. Hegel's discussion of the "flower" and "animal" religions in *Phenomenology of Spirit* stresses the harmless, benign character of these early intuitions of spirit in nature. Totem objects, therefore, rarely have been the target of iconoclastic fervor. On the contrary, the characteristic imperial attitude toward totems was one of curiosity and curatorial solicitude. Totemism represents what anthropologist Sir James Frazer and others regarded as "the childhood of the human species," and thus it has been treated with tolerance and condescension. Frazer, in fact, sent out questionnaires to missionaries, doctors, and government administrators throughout the British Empire in order to gather the information for his first book, *Totemism* (1887).<sup>38</sup>

It is crucial to remind ourselves at this point of what is probably obvious: these objects—totems, fetishes, and idols—are anything but objective. They are really objectivist projections of a kind of collective imperial subject, fantasies about other people, specifically other people's beliefs about certain kinds of objects. Totemism, fetishism, and idolatry are thus "secondary beliefs,"<sup>39</sup> beliefs about the beliefs of other people, and thus inseparable from (in fact, constitutive of) systems of racial or collective prejudice. They involve quite general notions about the operations of the "savage" or "primitive" mentality—that the natives are invariably gullible and superstitious; that they live in a world of fear and ignorance where these objects compensate for their weakness; that they lack the ability to make distinctions between animate and inanimate objects. These objects are, moreover, firmly held collective and official imperial belief systems, axioms within scientific discourses of ethnography and comparative religion, not just private opinions. Beliefs about idolaters—for instance, that they believe the idol hears their prayers and that it will intercede on their behalf and be pleased with their sacrifices—are articles of faith for the iconoclast, held so firmly that they justify the extermination of idolaters as subhuman creatures. The Portuguese trader had to believe that his African trading partner sincerely believed that an oath sworn on a fetish object was binding,

38. Sir James Frazer, *Totemism* (Edinburgh, A. & C. Black, 1887); for an account of Frazer's methods, see "A Chronology of Sir James George Frazer," xlvii, in Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, A New Abridgement from the Second and Third Editions, ed. Robert Frazer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

39. Cf. the discussion of secondary beliefs in chapter 4.

even if he himself shared no such belief. (An idolater, by contrast, can never be believed: "they will respect not in you the ties either of kinship" according to the Qur'an, 9:8—though the Qur'an is realistic about the need to make compromises on this point.)<sup>40</sup> The British anthropologist has to believe that the native informant is telling him the truth when he explains the magical beliefs surrounding a specific totem ritual. The natives have to really believe that their souls are deposited in a totem object for safekeeping during the ritual death of initiation ceremonies, even though the natives may seem at times fully aware of the play-acting character of the ritual. Wittgenstein noted that the literalness of Frazer's beliefs in natives' beliefs prevented him from entertaining more complex notions of ritual and religion that might involve a complex combination of play and seriousness.<sup>41</sup>

It is tempting to summarize the history of imperialism as the sequence from idolatry (empires of conquest and colonization of territory) to fetishism (mercantilist, seafaring empires) to totemism (the mature, that is to say, British, form of empire, combining mercantilism and territorial expansion, the spread of trading monopolies and religious missions). Imperial theory in general is fond of triadic narratives—sociologist Giovanni Arrighi's Genoese/Dutch/British dialectic of "accumulation" and "territorialism" is a classic instance.<sup>42</sup> And there is a sense in which the concepts of idolatry, fetishism, and totemism adumbrate a historical sequence in terms of the history of words and their application. Idolatry clearly comes first, dating to the ancient Greek and Hebrew texts as a discourse on iconoclasm and iconophilia, law, morality, national identity, and imperial destiny (the figure of Zion and the Promised Land later become the central ideology of the modern, especially Protestant, empires). Fetishism and totemism, by contrast, are modern words, arising as a kind of colonial pidgin language (along with words like *taboo*, *mana*, *nabob*, *bamboozled*, and *loot*). The fe-

40. See the Qur'an, chap. 9 (Repentance), verse 8 on the inability to establish kinship or covenants with idolaters (in contrast with the contractual function of fetishism, and the centrality of kinship to totemism). The realism of the Qur'an on this matter is notable also: idolaters may be slain, but they may also be forgiven and spared if they repent (9:5); if they come to you for asylum, you may grant it; and if you make a treaty with them "near the sacred mosque" (9:7), then you should honor it as long as the idolaters do not violate it. See the University of Southern California's online edition of the Qur'an: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/>.

41. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, trans. A. C. Miles (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), 1–18.

42. See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1994).

tish, as I have said, is a seventeenth-century "discovery" or "invention" — a new word, concept, and image in the world. Similarly, totemism springs up in nineteenth-century North America on the "wilderness" frontier (Canada during the American Revolution), and enters the English language through the memoirs of an English fur trader named John Long.<sup>43</sup>

So the sequence of idol/fetish/totem hints at a historical unfolding of the bad objects of empire, a progression from bad to tolerated to curated and collected. Perhaps this is just a measure of the increasing power and invincibility of modern imperialism. The extirpation of idolatry only makes sense to an empire that is insecure about its grip on the colonial territory, or utterly fanatical about its religious mission or its love of war. Fetishism, by contrast, is the merchant's religion. It's about making deals with the devil. And totemism is — well, that's the question, isn't it? This term tends to differentiate itself from the other two in a variety of ways. Perhaps its most notable differences are (1) its adoption as a technical term in anthropology and comparative religion as an imperial universal that is supposed to provide the key to primitive religions and mentalities, and (2) its vernacular usage in a weakened and vague sense of the "symbolic," along with the all-purpose pop icon of the "totem pole" and the "totem animal" as prototypes for public monuments, corporate logos, and the mascots of teams and men's clubs (Elks, Moose, Eagles, Raptors, and so on). Perhaps the most conspicuous thing about "totemism" as a catchphrase is its lack of polemical force: idolatry and fetishism are accusations; totemism is a fairly neutral classification of objects and object choices.

Any historical account of the idol/fetish/totem triad has to recognize that the story could go just the other way as well, as it does in the writing of Durkheim, where totemism is installed as the earliest phenomenon, and fetishism and idolatry are treated as later developments.<sup>44</sup> This is a different kind of history, of course: sociology and anthropology, not philology. Durkheim doesn't care about the modern provenance of the word *totem*. He is concerned with its applicability as a concept to explain the elementary forms of religious life. So despite the hints of a historical progression in this trio of terms, I would urge caution and flexibility on this front. The meanings of the three terms shift in various contexts. Their real interest is

43. See chapter 8 for a discussion of John Long.

44. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912], trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

as much a matter of structural logic as of historical progression, which is why they can coexist as a highly adaptable discourse of bad objecthood in the same historical moment, and why the same object could, from various angles, receive all three names. Fetishism is often contrasted to idolatry as the cruder, more materialistic variation on the investment of life and value in worthless objects. Totemism can be defined, as it was by its theoretical inventor, anthropologist Andrew McLennan, as "fetishism plus exogamy and matrilineal descent."<sup>45</sup> The three kinds of objects can be differentiated quite strictly in relation to categories such as gods (idols), natural forces (totems), and artifacts (fetishes). In the family romance framework of psychoanalysis, the idol is the father, or Big Other; the fetish is the Mother's Breast, or Little Other; and the totem is the natural kind as sister, brother, or kinfolk. Or the three objects can be placed in a sliding scale, differentiated by degree, in which case the fetish is just a deflated, miniaturized version of the totem (lacking the communal investment), and the idol is just an inflated, gigantic version (insisting on its supreme importance and imperial ambitions).

The British Empire's most conspicuous use of these bad objects was to differentiate themselves from the bad, old idolatrous empires and their modern Catholic rivals. Milton's Paradise sets the stage for this contrast. The Garden of Eden is a colonial "plantation" in which the innocent, childlike natives are given light agricultural work ("Sweet gardening labor" [bk. 4, line 328]) under the benign supervision of Raphael. The natives are instructed to be patient and loyal, not to seek to learn forbidden knowledge that is beyond their station, and especially not to be misled by "Some specious object by the foe suborned" (bk. 9, line 361).<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, then, they are to be emancipated as equal citizens in the heavenly empire along with the angels. Meanwhile, Satan is portrayed as an imperial seafarer sailing "Beyond the Cape of Hope," past Mozambique,<sup>47</sup> smelling the spices and sweet perfume of paradise (bk. 4, line 160). He declares his motives to be the acquisition of new slaves, and "Honor and empire with revenge enlarged, / By conquering this new world" (bk. 4, lines 390–91), but his quest has a religious dimension as well. He is the Antichrist ruling over an empire of

45. Andrew McLennan, "The Worship of Animals and Plants," *Fortnightly Review*, vols. 6 and 7, 1869–70; quoted in Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, 13.

46. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* [1667], ed. William G. Madsen (New York: Modern Library, 1969). Note that Satan addresses Eve as "Empress" in order to flatter her (bk. 6, line 626).

47. See Gilman, "Madagascar on My Mind."

devils who will play their historical role as pagan idols (Baal, Beelzebub, Ashtoreth, Moloch, Mammon, Belial, and so on; see book 1). Satan himself is "the first grand thief" who has climbed into God's fold, as "into his Church lewd hirelings climb" (bk. 4, line 193). In short, Satan is the spiritual leader of the rival Catholic empires who enslave their colonial subjects, and maintain them in a state of brute savagery by encouraging their idolatrous religions. As Willem Bosman put it in his *Description of Guinea* (1704), "If it was possible to convert the Negroes to the Christian Religion, the Roman-Catholics would succeed better than we should because they already agree in several particulars, especially in their ridiculous ceremonies."<sup>48</sup> Needless to say, the ceremonies were, from the Protestant standpoint, virtually indistinguishable from pagan idolatry.

Totemism might be seen in this light as an imperial compromise formation, dictated by the exigencies of colonial warfare and the fur trade. John Long, who brought the word and concept of totemism back to England in 1791, had spent twenty years fighting alongside the Chippewa Indians against the American colonists. He had "gone native," been initiated as a totem brother with the figure of his totem animal inscribed on his chest. As a fur trader, he was interested in the preservation of a Canadian wilderness for continued trapping, as opposed to the breakaway settler colonists of America with their Jeffersonian agrarianism and their policy of Indian removal.<sup>49</sup> Totemism marks the point when the bad object of the Other is adopted by the imperial conqueror, when the possibility—indeed, the imperative—of exogamy, intermarriage, and colonial exchange at the level of the body becomes imaginable. It also marks the moment when the bad object of the Other, and the whole culture that supports it, has become so precarious and weak that it is transformed from an object of iconoclastic aversion to one of curatorial solicitude and sentimentality.

### Fossils

If idols, fetishes, and totems were the bad objects of imperialism, we need to ask ourselves what is the bad object of *empire*, of the dematerialized, virtual world of globalization we now inhabit. My answer is simple: it is the

fossil, understood as the material image of extinct life. Unlike idols, fetishes, and totems, fossils are seen as purely objective, purely natural objects, uncontaminated by human artifice or fantasy. Fossils are thus even more radically "other" than fetishes, idols, or totems, because they signify the lost, nonhuman worlds of natural history and deep, geological time. They also signify a radical form of death that goes beyond any of the mass exterminations carried out by imperial conquerors. They signify species death, the utter vanishing of an entire class of living things.

Fossils are, at the same time, not Other at all, but creations of modern science and objective rationality. Fossils are *our* thing. Primitive societies never understand what fossils "really" mean as scientific objects; they regard them as taboo objects or freaks of nature. And in this case, primitive society continues right up to the European Enlightenment, because it was not until the 1790s, as Cuvier sorted through the imperial collections of fossils coming to Paris as a result of the conquest of Belgium, that the modern meaning of the fossil was uncovered. And it was not French Catholic idolatry that conceived of the fossil, but Cartesian rationality and a mechanistic notion of living organisms. Mature nineteenth-century imperialism, with its global reach and archives of living organisms, was a precondition for discovering the true nature of fossils as the relics of extinct life-forms.

Like all bad objects, fossils produce ambivalent reactions. Their rarity makes them objects of fascination. Their association with extinction inevitably makes them solemn, even melancholy figures, rather like those mournful object lessons provided by the relics of imperial civilizations. This is especially noticeable in the cult of the dinosaur, which dominates the natural history museums of the great imperial cities, and which is routinely characterized as an "imperial" animal group that once ruled the entire world.<sup>50</sup> The object lesson of the dinosaur, moreover, has become the regnant cliché of our time. The cycles of innovation and obsolescence that are endemic to technical progress and capital growth, the emergence of gigantic new corporate bodies locked in a Darwinian struggle for survival, the inability to imagine, as theorist Fred Jameson puts it, the end of capitalism as a more plausible outcome than the death of the human species—all this adds up to an ideological complex that makes the fossil the bad ob-

50. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book: The Life and Times of a Cultural Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), for a fuller discussion of the dinosaur as imperial icon and modern totem.

48. Excerpts from Bosman's *Description* are collected in *Modern Mythology: 1680-1860*, ed. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 46.

49. For more on John Long and the emergence of totemism, see chapter 8.

ject of our time. We now stand at the threshold of a world order that may well threaten the existence of everyone, as if we had created a Moloch-like Matrix that demanded the sacrifice of the human species itself. If Joshua Reynolds is right, the arts can do nothing but follow in the train of empire, adorning the palaces of the new emperors. If Blake is right, the arts and the sciences are in a much more complex position. On the one hand, they are making possible all the techniques of domination and exploitation on which the new form of empire depends, and providing the ideological fantasies that make this process seem natural and inevitable. On the other hand, they provide the prophetic visions that let us see where we are going before we get there: like the idols of old, they "go before us" into possible and probable futures. How to disentangle these objectives, how to transform our objects and ourselves, is the great task of art—and empire—in our time.

But what is "our time"? Is it the post-9/11 world of terrorism and incipient forms of neofascism, from the Taliban to the new American imperialism? Is it the era of postmodernism, or of a modernism (as philosopher-anthropologist Bruno Latour argues) that may never have existed? Is it a time defined by new media and new technologies, an era of "biocybernetic reproduction" to succeed Walter Benjamin's "mechanical reproduction," Marshall McLuhan's "wired world" displacing the time when one could tell the difference between a machine and an organism? Is it a moment when new objects in the world produce new philosophies of objectivism, and old theories of vitalism and animism seem (like fossil formations) to take on new lives?

In the next chapter, I want to continue our pursuit of the animated image-object in an expanded historical perspective that goes back into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the periods known as Enlightenment and Romanticism, the eras that precede a modernism that now seems, as art historian T. J. Clark has argued, so remote as to require an archaeology to recover it. My primary aim is not, however, to provide a panoramic survey but to take a snapshot of a specific historical moment, the 1790s in Europe, when two new objects entered that world, altering its entire picture of physical reality in the process.