



The Panic of the Visual: A Conversation with Edward W. Said

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W. J. T. Mitchell

WJTM: I thought that we would just start with the motivation for this interview, which was to draw you out about questions on visual arts and the media. When I first broached the idea about interviewing you about the visual arts, your first response was that you might have nothing to say.

EWS: [Laughter] It was also my second one.

WJTM: I don't believe it, of course. And on the basis of that, I want to pursue it. I want to know what you make of that as your first—and second—reaction. Why did you seem to want to hold it off?

EWS: Well, because, I will tell you quite honestly, because when it comes to the oral and the verbal, the auditory and the verbal, I have a very highly developed vocabulary and considerable experience and practice in talking about them. When it comes to the visual arts, with a few exceptions, in my writing, I haven't dealt with them, so I feel somewhat tongue-tied.

WJTM: Tongue-tied? This is a novel experience for you.

EWS: It definitely is.

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WJTM: What are the specific visual arts that you don't feel tongue-tied about? You said there were some exceptions.

EWS: Yes, many exceptions, in a sense, as I thought about the questions you sent me. I can talk with some effectiveness about individual things. But just to think about the visual arts generally sends me into a panic.

WJTM: Perhaps we should call this conversation "The Panic of the Visual."

Let's start by talking about museums. Are you a regular museum goer? And which museums do you find yourself revisiting most regularly?

EWS: Well, I'm not a regular museum goer, actually. I tend to go to museums if they have shows that are of interest to me, and, occasionally, if I find myself in physical proximity to one, without planning or premeditation, I go into one. That was the case a couple of weeks ago. I was on Fifth Avenue, and I hadn't been to the Frick in a long time, and I said to myself, "Well, let me just go and look," and I did that. That's the kind of thing that I do. I don't visit galleries very often. I might go with a friend to see something specific, but I could go to Paris half a dozen times and not visit the Louvre. But I might go, as I did a couple of years ago, to see something at the Grand Palais.

WJTM: And as you walk into a museum, do you find your steps going to any particular department? Toward painting, sculpture, photography?

EWS: I would say painting and photography more than sculpture. Although, I recall a period about thirty years ago, when I became suddenly, tremendously, involved in Rodin, whose work I had never seen. It must've been more than thirty years ago. And I visited the Rodin museum and started to collect prints of the sculptures I had seen. But mostly it's paintings, and I would say that with very few exceptions, most of my interest is focused on the period, let's say, from the late eighteenth century to the present. I find that earlier paintings, let's say Renaissance paintings, on the whole, don't really excite my visual senses.

WJTM: So historically, basically the same interests that you have in literature.

EWS: Oh, *except* in literature, especially in English, I tend to go back considerably to the earlier periods. I'm very fond of Langland and much of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. So my range in visual art is less catholic than literature, I think.

WJTM: Now, you mentioned the Louvre before. As you probably know, in recent years, the Louvre has invited a number of people who are not really curators, not experts on visual art, to curate exhibitions. That is, to make some kind of personal selection from their archives. If you could do that, with the Louvre or with some museum, what would you do?

EWS: Well, I haven't thought about that very much. The first name that comes to mind is somebody who has been a great passion of mine for most of my adult life, and that is Goya. And I'd certainly want to do it around Goya and, to a great extent, all of his work. Including the earlier stuff and then the bullfighting pictures and the portraits and then, of course, the rather visionary, and dramatic pictures of his last years. There's something about Goya that strikes me as absolutely essential, at least in my experience.

WJTM: Can you say a little more about that? What is it about Goya?

EWS: I think it's a number of things. One is that there's a kind of freedom and fantasy, and an almost melodramatic sense. You know, like Saturn eating his children, or the various paintings from the house of the dead, *The Disasters of War*, the painting about the execution of May the third—these are very compelling to me. There's a kind of detachment. I mean, they're very involved, very free paintings, in many ways. But I feel the kind of ironic distance that he has at the same time that he's so passionately involved in the subject that he cares about. There's a kind of gentleness in the middle of all the violence that impresses me a great deal. And then, above all, to me, tremendously effective colors. You know the violence of the colors, the swirling of them, the freedom with which he throws them around the canvas. It's very powerful, and they stay in my mind as no other paintings do.

WJTM: As I listen to you talk about this, I can't help associating all the qualities you find in Goya with . . .

EWS: Blake.

WJTM: No. Not really. Perhaps Blake. But, no, with you yourself.

EWS and WJTM: [Laughter]

WJTM: That is, your position with relation to a whole set of very conflicted and even violent situations in politics. Particularly in relation to the Palestinian movement with which you have kind of an ironic attachment, a gentleness and passionate skepticism. Your posture there has been, can I say, Goyaesque?

EWS: Well, you can say that. But, I mean, I'm not saying it. But the other thing that I've also always been very impressed with, especially remembering one of Goya's paintings in the Frick, is his absolutely unreverential quality towards aristocrats and authority. There's always, you know, some gig or some flaw that you see that he seems anxious to point out, even in the kinds of painting that most painters I know of would not actually want to do. I mean going a step in the direction of somebody like Francis Bacon. It's almost like that, but it isn't.

WJTM: Yes. I think that's a very shrewd observation, actually.

EWS: I find that very compelling. That's another thing that I identify with in Goya . . . absolute unwillingness to take authority for anything more than something that is obviously put on and posed and dressed up and self-regarding. One of the things that you notice in all of his aristocrats is a sense that they take themselves very seriously and that they think of themselves as quite grand people. And you get that sense, but at the same time you get—Goya, somehow, I don't know how he does it—some sense of comment on that. You know, the way Glenn Gould played Bach or some composer—you're not only getting the music but also a kind of intelligent commentary on it. And in Goya's case, it's always unreverential.

WJTM: Yes. It's as if he has found some kind of middle ground between realism and caricature . . .

EWS: Yes, exactly, exactly.

WJTM: . . . and is capable of treating people with a certain amount of sympathy and detachment simultaneously. Not turning them into a total stereotype, but certainly not taking them at their own estimation of themselves.

EWS: Exactly. That would certainly be true.

And then I would want to put, since we're talking about Spain, you know, Velázquez, a painter who doesn't really speak to me as much as El Greco does. Particularly in the later paintings, the religious paintings and the still lifes, you know, the landscapes, the *View of Toledo*. There's something quite haunted and almost frightening about them that's always mystified and drawn me to them. You know those great elongated figures, particularly the clerics and the church figures that he was so interested in. All of whom, unlike Goya, filled one with fear and a kind of mysteriousness. To someone like me, who is quite secular and unschooled in the ways of the church of his time, all this suggests hidden labyrinths and the powerful

siege of the Inquisition and the ordeals of faith and vision at the same time. So I would sort of associate the two, but then I would go forward to include a certain kind of photography.

WJTM: The most sustained piece of critical writing about the visual arts that I know of by you is probably your collaborative photographic essay with Jean Mohr, *After the Last Sky*. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about the specific relation with photography. When did you . . .

EWS: We've dropped the curatorial question that you asked me?

WJTM: Well, we can stay with it if you like. I actually did have a second part to that which was . . .

EWS: No, no. I was just going to add Picasso, who also means a lot to me, particularly in association with those visionary, unspeakably volatile paintings of Goya. And the almost ecstatic quality that you find in some of the El Greco paintings, you also find in the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, for example, of Picasso and in some of those Cézanne paintings of the mountains and the scenery around Aix, which have meant a great deal to me. And then, also, the kind of semihysterical paintings of van Gogh, which, you know, have all kinds of literary resonances.

But to get to the reference about Jean Mohr. I never attempted anything like that, and it was, I think, at a period when I had been particularly involved in Palestinian politics and feeling very, very strongly about two things. One was the absence in what I was doing—which was speaking and writing—of any kind of personal dimension to it, and I found myself so involved in the collective and the official and the unofficial that I felt there was something profoundly askew in what I was writing about. And the second thing was a very strong feeling of exile, having been for many years, at that point, about twenty years, involved politically and not having been able to go to the Middle East. This was also during the middle of the Lebanese civil war, so I couldn't go there. And I knew I was unable to go to Palestine, because I was a member of the National Council. I tried several times to go to the West Bank and Gaza, but when friends put out feelers to the Israelis, I was told I would not be allowed in or I would be put in jail immediately, or something of that sort. But I felt very strongly the sense of being unable to connect directly. And it was at that time in the early '80s that I met John Berger. I had written a review of the book he did with Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, which impressed me a great deal because it was really about the way one could narrate with pictures.

WJTM: Yes.

EWS: Jean is a rather taciturn, modest man, and he said, "You know, I have an archive of eight or nine thousand photographs of Palestinians that I've been taking since I worked for the Red Cross, beginning in 1948." So I remember visiting him and going through this archive. And then there was another event, at that time, perhaps the climax of the whole thing, which was this 1983 UN conference on Palestine, for which I was a consultant. So I suggested, having seen his pictures, to the organizers in Geneva that we hang some of his pictures in the entrance of the UN in Geneva, and they accepted, but they said that the only way they could get the Arab states to agree to this, was, ironically, that we not have any captions. I tell this story at the beginning of *After the Last Sky*.

WJTM: I remember it well.

EWS: So there's that sense of the silent pictures without a commentary, which itself would be intrusive and political from the point of view of the Arabs. I was considered to be a kind of unguided missile. They thought I might say the "wrong thing." So I felt compelled, in a sense, to do the book. And so we spent, or, rather, I spent weeks and weeks making a selection of the photographs from his enormous archive. And he didn't demur. I mean, it wasn't his choice, it was my choice. Occasionally, he would say, "Well, I'm not so sure I see this picture quite the way you do." And I wasn't really looking for pictures—this is very important—I wasn't really looking for photographs that I thought were exceptionally good, as opposed to ones that were not exceptionally good. I was just looking at photographs that I felt provoked some kind of response in me. I couldn't formulate what the response was. But I chose them. And then, looking at the photographs and having them spread out all over the floor for weeks on end, I then began to group them in series. And I couldn't, at that point, tell myself or anyone else what the series were, but they seemed to belong together. Then I broke them down into four groups with series within them. And I felt that I was actually doing it in a kind of abstract way. That's to say, I was really working according to principles that are much easier for me to deal with within the nonrepresentational art of the Islamic world. You know, where there were certain kinds of patterns that you could see that were not representational in the sense, you know, that they had a subject, but they had some motif and rather a musical motif. And so I decided that I would do the book in four parts. Then I devised topics for each of the parts and proceeded ac-

cordingly. The last thing was that I arranged the pictures on the page in a particular way. At the top of the page, on the side of the page, lengthwise, full length, framed, unframed, that kind of thing.

WJTM: I don't think I fully realized the extent to which this whole procedure was almost a musical operation.

EWS: Yes, yes. Because I couldn't find a simple scheme for it that had a kind of narrative, or even a philosophical equivalent.

WJTM: Yes.

EWS: And so I ended up calling the first one "States" and the second one "Interior," and the third one "Emergence" and the fourth one "Past and Future," which are, you know, fairly innocuous and abstracting. I tried to fill them with the sense of the primitive meaning of those things, in terms of Palestinian statements, the state of Palestinian life, the people. In the second part, for example, inside their houses, how they inhabit these displaced places. The first picture, for example, which I thought was a wonderful photograph, was of a doorway in a refugee camp in Jordan, which had lots and lots and lots of scribbling and writing over it and a little child peeking through the door. And that struck me as the perfect example to start the thing off, because it all really had to do with the *min al-dakhil*, which is "from the interior" and what that means to Palestinians.

WJTM: Yes. So in some sense there were photographs that you thought were just marvelous images in themselves for pulling out some essential feature . . .

EWS: Yes.

WJTM: . . . of Palestinian identity.

EWS: But I couldn't, and I still can't, with any certainty, talk about them with any confidence, talk about them as photographic objects. I couldn't analyze them. I was really more interested in how they corresponded to or in some way complemented what I was feeling. And, of course, underlying the whole thing was the theory that I had written about in an essay that had appeared in the *London Review of Books* called "Permission to Narrate." And I talked about the difficulties of Palestinian narratives . . . that is to say, we didn't have and couldn't formulate a linear narrative in the national sense for all kind of reasons. There were too many obstacles, we were too divided over this and that, and the absence of a center made our lives

essentially fragmented. And so, you know, departing from that, then I said, well, I can't tell a story in a traditional way or in an accepted way. And I had to do something else.

WJTM: Was the dating of the photographs important to you? Did it matter to you whether a photograph came from 1965 or 1975?

EWS: No. I didn't find that at all important. I found, instead, that what was important was the face. I would look at it, and if the face said something to me, then I might, or might not, ask Jean who the person was, and he would inevitably then tell me who the person was and what his story was—why he took the picture or what was interesting about him. But that wasn't always the case, and I chose a lot of the pictures precisely because you couldn't date them. There was a kind of, a kind of . . . how shall I put it? There was a kind of . . .

WJTM: Unknowability?

EWS: Yes. Exactly.

WJTM: On the issue of the unknowable: I think one of the most intriguing and moving moments in that book for me is when you describe looking at the photograph of a woman who's shown in a very close-up portrait. She has her chin in her hand, she's looking directly at the camera . . .

EWS: . . . and her face is full of lines.

WJTM: Yes. You start talking about the picture of her as something that captures our life at home.

EWS: Right.

WJTM: And then I believe that it was your sister, or perhaps Mariam, who said to you, "No, that's Mrs. Farage."

EWS: Yes, exactly.

WJTM: And there was this moment in your text where you pause and realize you'd been caught with the unknowable suddenly turning into the knowable . . .

EWS: Exactly.

WJTM: . . . and it really threw you off . . .

EWS: Also, feeling at the same time that, as I said, something had been lost.

WJTM: Yes.

EWS: I was interested in the slippage between not recognizing her and then recognizing her, or, you know, suddenly because somebody said that that's who she was and then I remembered her. And then realizing, in between the two sensations, there was this quite real face, and in that face was something that I couldn't describe. I remember then dividing that photograph off from the rest of the chapter, the end of the chapter called "Interior."

WJTM: Are there going to be any photographs or other kinds of illustrations in the memoir that you're working on?

EWS: Yes. Last week, I talked about this with my editor, my English editor, who was here, and we were working on the manuscript. I mean, I've turned in about one hundred thousand words of it now, and so we have a pretty good sense of how it's going to end. And, hopefully, of when it's going to end. And we thought that it would be necessary to have some photographs of a rather personal time from my past. I don't really know how some of them got here, but there are a lot of photos sitting in big boxes in one of our cupboards that I've seemed to collect over the years, beginning with pictures from the late '30s right up until the present.

WJTM: And do you think you'll be addressing those or talking about them?

EWS: I do it in a funny way in the text. In other words, there are certain things . . . For example, since you mentioned it, this morning, I was working on one of the great characters of my memoir, which was my father. We had a very, to me, painful and quite traumatic relationship. He was a very laconic man. I never knew really very much about his past. But, in addition, he was always there on top of me in the sense that he was trying to make me do certain kinds of things, all that had to do with my body. I mean, I felt that from the age of eight—seven or eight—that there were many things wrong with me. Until I was twenty-one, he totally dominated me. I remember when I graduated from Princeton, we went to New York. He'd always been, since I was a boy, complaining about the fact that I had very bad posture. He was always after me for that. And then we went from Princeton to New York to shop in Manhattan. I don't remember exactly where, but he bought me a truss, which I wore—I mean, it was straight out of Freud! . . .

WJTM: [Laughter]

EWS: . . . which I wore to keep my back straight. And we were that kind of thing. There was always something wrong. In the passage I'm writing now,

about things from that same time, when I found out in 1961—I remember the moment very, very well—that he had melanoma, which ultimately killed him . . . I mean, it took hold and then metastasized into lung cancer and all the rest of it. When I realized that he was going to die—and that's the passage I'm writing now—it was like the earth fell out from underneath me. I realized also the particular kind of affection I had for him and the relationship that we had. I have a picture of my father and me from 1937 or 1938. I was a tiny child. It's a picture on the beach in Alexandria. He's standing behind me, or rather sitting behind me, and I'm standing. And, you know, he's sustaining me, on the one hand, and yet one could also see the power and the authority which dominated me at that time.

WJTM: Are there other kinds of images that take you back to these formative moments?

EWS: Yes. I had wanted to mention that because of your having sent me these questions about visuality—arts, media, experiences, memories—that the visual culture that did surround us was almost all nonancient Egyptian, non-Pharaonic, and almost always Islamic. There were no museums in Jerusalem, and, in Cairo, my experience was more with architecture and patterns and designs that were ultimately calligraphic than with perspective and the representation of a figure, and with iconography of the sort that one finds in Western pictorial traditions. So the painterly and the picturesque were, to me, very obscure. There were no keys to them.

Then, there were two very powerful visual experiences of my youth, and I remember them very well. One of them was the wax museum, to which we would go often because I was so fascinated by the scenes from Egyptian history. You know, the opening of the Suez Canal, the dynasties. This was during the monarchical period. They were lifelike figures, and I remember looking at them—I was very small, five, six, seven at the time—and always expecting them to move and say something, and, of course, they didn't. But I kept going back. A close friend of my parents, a historian, who lived in Beirut, would come to Cairo once a year or twice a year. I remember one of the great pleasures of those days was to go to the wax museum with him and have *him* make the speech and make the figures seem to speak.

WJTM: Yes.

EWS: That was very important. And the second visual experience that was fascinating to me were the exhibitions in the Agriculture Museum, which must have been built by the British, a series of three huge buildings in Giza.

The central building had exhibits of all the various wheat, sugarcane, and agricultural products, and instructive displays about Egyptian ecology, as well as birds and animals, and so on. But what fascinated me the most were the glass cases with exhibitions of various diseases, not lifelike images but anatomical representations of the human body. I would go back to them time after time after time to look at bilharzia, elephantiasis, and things of this sort.

WJTM: Were these pictures of people afflicted with . . .

EWS: But they weren't pictures only. There were pictures and models.

WJTM: I see.

EWS: And they gripped me with, of course, a terrified fascination.

WJTM: When you say "models," you mean models of the bacteria, themselves?

EWS: Of the . . . let's say . . . I remember, for instance, an abdomen afflicted with elephantiasis . . . not only elephantiasis, but yaws. You would see the front of it and then a cutaway, so you could see the inside, that kind of thing. They were like medical models.

WJTM: Yes, yes.

EWS: I was extremely taken with these and, of course, read the inscriptions many times over and felt myself to be threatened by them because they seemed to be all around. Aside from that, it wasn't until I came to Europe for the first time in the early '50s that I went to art museums. Before that, museums simply weren't part of my experience at all.

WJTM: So this does certainly make plausible some of your reticence, your feeling that you came late to the Western art traditions.

EWS: I came very late. And, of course, there was such a heavy emphasis upon the writing and the reading on the one hand and the musical on the other in my efforts.

WJTM: Yes. I find your account of the Agricultural Museum in Giza particularly fascinating, since it seems like the most unlikely impressive visual experience for a child. Do you think that that has resonated in any way for you later? What does it connect to for you now?

EWS: It may be that the influence and the images are now coming back to

me partly because of my disease, you know and the visualization one has of it. But the idea that one's body conceals within it, in a way that becomes more and more visible, the progress of a disease, a dread sort of decomposing, or degenerative or distorting process, is to me, extremely compelling. And I remember very well, for instance, also, in my youth, seeing a movie of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

WJTM: Oh, yes.

EWS: I was in my early teens at the time, and I don't know whether you remember the film, but George Sanders was in it, and Dorian was played by Hurd Hatfield. The painting, which was revealed in the last part of the film up in the attic, as he went on and became more decadent and more degenerate, and he remained as beautiful as ever, the painting aged and became decomposed. There was a painting which I researched, and it was by Ivan Albright—do you remember him?—an American artist of the '30s and '40s who was fascinated by images of decomposition and disease. They commissioned him for this film. I remember this because it resonated with my experiences at the Agricultural Museum.

WJTM: Perhaps this also links back to your fascination with Goya and with El Greco, both of whom represent the deformation of the body . . .

EWS: Yes.

WJTM: . . . so vividly.

EWS: Absolutely.

WJTM: Now, I want to ask you about the first time you *saw* an opera, as opposed to hearing one on records, and what the effect was of encountering opera as spectacle for the first time? Was that an important experience?

EWS: Well, I remember exactly the first opera I saw. I must have been about, twelve or thirteen. It was in Cairo. There was a season of Italian opera every year in the winter. I think it must have begun around January and ended at the end of February for two months. My parents had a subscription. I was taken to the opera for the first time to see *Andrea Chenier*, which is, in my opinion, a third-rate opera by a fifth-grade composer [Laughter] called Giordano. I'd never heard of him or the opera, but I remember the first question I asked my parents, and I think maybe it was my father: "Do they sing all the way through, or is there any talking?" And they said, "No it's singing all the way through, no talking." So I was fairly intimidated

by this, because I didn't know Italian. And when we went, I was much oppressed by the notion of listening to an opera, to music, to words I couldn't completely understand. But I remember being completely overwhelmed by the spectacle for which I wasn't at all prepared. I mean, I thought it would be just people. I hadn't seen performances or attended performances of oratorios and various choirs. That would have been the limit of my musical experiences. But to see it . . . I remember the man who played Gerard, who was the baritone villain in the opera, Gino Bechi, who was a famous Italian opera singer of the '40s and '50s. Doing the kinds of things on stage that Douglas Fairbanks would do in a movie—fencing, then sliding across the table and doing it while singing all the time. It immensely pleased me. At the same time, I thought the music was uninteresting. I remember also later finding in our record library his big aria, which was called "Enemy of the People," sung by somebody else—I don't remember who, it wasn't Bechi—and listening to it over and over again for sort of confirmation and reliving of this opera that I'd seen only once. Of course, the last thing that really impressed me and gripped me, I should say, about the experience, was that it was so rare. It wasn't something you could go back to, the way you can play a record over again. It wasn't something you could look at again the way you could look at a painting or an object. It was "in time," and it was a very fine moment, and the only way you could recapture it was by memory, and my musical memory was quite formidable in those days. I was able to play over bits of it again in my head, and it wasn't until I came to the United States as an undergraduate at Princeton that I was able to make the further connection with the score.

WJTM: So what do you think is the importance for you of the spectacle in opera? Is this something you find relatively dispensable?

EWS: Not at all. In fact, in recent years, I've become almost obsessed with it. That is to say, I realize that most of my own experiences, most, but not all, of my own experiences of opera going have been ones in which the spectacle is absolutely essential. I have always been immensely troubled by the original idea of that setting and even the direction. The visual elements of the opera were meant simply to be a kind of background to the singer. Throughout my early years of opera going, both in Egypt and at the Met, I remember distinctly the immense power of going to Bayreuth in 1958—I was twenty-two at the time and had just graduated from Princeton—and seeing the effect of this rather more integrated, this rather more interpretive notion of direction and theme in use by the Wagner brothers. I mean, there

was a programmatic side to it, that is to say, they wanted to strip away from *The Ring*, from, lets say, all the Germanic and realistic, in the verisimilitudinous sense of the word, baggage of the opera. So there were no helmets, there were no spears, there were no chariots, there were no fur coats, no huts and all the rest of it. It was very abstract. Most of the effects were achieved by lighting and this quite remarkable notion of a disk on which the actor stood, which sometimes would break in half, would sometimes tilt, would sometimes be flat, depending on the action. I thought that kind of spectacle was what I had always missed in representational and eurythmic interpretation. And ever since then, I thought them out. I mean, I've always tried to find directorate and theme designers who think of those visual and dramatic aspects of the opera as equal with the musical, and that's why I've developed such an interest in opera. It's to see the integration of the visual, the dramatic, the musical, and, of course, the historical. I mean, how does history get into these things?

WJTM: Perhaps this is a good time to bring up the question I raised with you about Foucault and his theoretical statements about exactly this problem. I'm thinking particularly of Deleuze's account of Foucault as a thinker whose analytical categories are fundamentally divided between the seeable and the sayable, or the articulable and the visible. Are these distinctions that make sense to you and that you feel are useful?

EWS: Well, I've always felt that when Foucault spoke about epistemology, he certainly didn't have in mind the kind of epistemology one associates, let's say, with Kant or even Wittgenstein. There is, however, a distinctly theatrical component in his work, as if epistemology were a theatrical instrument of some sort.

WJTM: Yes.

EWS: And I recall, in particular, in *Les Mots et les choses*—and I think I was one of the first people to write about it after it came out in France—I remember reading it with tremendous excitement and realizing that Foucault's epistemology always had a kind of visual correlative, the notion of the table, or the tableau, the notion of the theme, the notion of transparency, and so on, which you couldn't always yourself visualize.

WJTM: Right.

EWS: But at least there were hints towards a fundamental dimension of display or theatricality in Foucault's work. And then, in *The Archaeology of*

Knowledge, The Order of Things, and Discipline and Punish, it struck me there that he was particularly anxious, actually, to begin with the visible—in other words, it was the *visible* that made possible the sayable. For instance, the dismemberment of Damians, the regicide, which opens the book on the prison, and then, of course, the whole notion in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* of the archive, which brings to mind, as I think it was intended, scenes from some of Borges. And in the rather special status, which was half seeable, half sayable, of the *énoncé*, or the statement, and then, in *The Order of Things*, where he was dramatizing himself, where he talks about standing in a place and speaking in a particular way, I find that all very much part of this kind of combination theater and speech, which was quite remarkable, quite unique.

WJTM: Right. And I take it that what Foucault means by the “heterotopia” is the conjunction of these modes of expressions, the seeable and the sayable . . .

EWS: Yes.

WJTM: . . . modalities that are not exactly commensurate, in that one can't just be straightforwardly substituted for the other.

EWS: Not at all, not at all. I mean, that's why I said correlative, not in the sense of interchangeable but in the sense of one doing something that the other can't do . . .

WJTM: Exactly.

EWS: . . . and if you remove one, then something is missing in the other.

WJTM: Let me take you with this topic to a slightly different territory, and that's the question of space and geography—place, landscaped territory—and the whole issue of the time-space problematic in your own work. I don't exactly have a formulated question about that . . .

EWS: No, but it's, you know . . .

WJTM: . . . it's clearly very important to you.

EWS: It's very clear in my mind.

WJTM: Okay. Please proceed.

EWS: I once evolved a kind of typology, a kind of pedagogic typology of thinkers who proceed according to temporality and are gripped by it, and

that would include, of course, the Hegelian tradition, the deconstructive tradition—people like de Man, Derrida, Lukács, and so on—and then what I call the spatial tradition, including figures like Vico and Gramsci. I find it in the Italian materialist tradition, going back to Lucretius, but including Vico and Gramsci. And there the conception of society is essentially territorial, and therefore, in criticism and philosophy, there's a whole question of how you cover one with the other, and how you move between different segments of a contested geography. And then I realized that I belong firmly in the second camp, because a lot of my work really deals with geographical demarcations, geographical spaces.

WJTM: Yes.

EWS: In a way, I think it's part—at least in my own experience—of the universality of the Palestinian experience, which is also about territory and contested space and dispossession, which means you have to do certain things because you don't have the space or the place. It's hard to regain some substitute or equivalent for space if you don't have it. And the relationship between language and space becomes an issue, above all, the notion of writing and distance, which very much informs my thinking about matters of exile and displacement.

WJTM: So earlier, when you talked about narrative and the Palestinian lack of a narrative, would you put that on the same side as the lack of the place, the lack of . . .

EWS: Absolutely.

WJTM: . . . the space?

EWS: The narrative here is a function of speaking from a place.

WJTM: I see. So narrative for you is actually a kind of spatial notion.

EWS: Absolutely. Not a temporal one. I mean, obviously, it has temporal elements—it would be silly not to acknowledge that. But it's principally, for me, the possibility of producing a territorial object, if you like, or a territorial location, as in *Robinson Crusoe*, where, in talking, he revisits, he repopulates, he reenacts both the shipwreck and the establishing of himself on the island. That's the core of it.

WJTM: Could you say something now about visual imagery and your long-standing commitment to secular interpretation—to a secular politics. Like all leftist critics, including myself, you're . . .

EWS: Our number is dwindling . . .

WJTM: Well . . . [Laughter] We'll survive somehow. You've often used concepts like fetishism and idolatry to talk about certain kinds of identity politics, certain kinds of nationalism. I wanted to ask if you have any kind of theoretical reflections on the notions of fetishism and idolatry—that is, the moment when an image becomes an end in itself, becomes personified, becomes mystifying. Are there any limits to your secularism? Do you have any fetishes or idols that you know of?

EWS: Well, as few as possible. Let me start in a kind of humdrum way. I'm very interested in certain kinds of objects, both visually and tactilely, especially fabrics, particularly the fabrics out of which clothes are made. These materials obsess me. I mean, I'm always interested in finding out . . .

WJTM: I've often remarked that your suitcase is at least three times as big as mine when you go on a trip.

EWS: That's something else . . . [Laughter] . . . but, I mean, I'm really choosy about the concept of the suitcases . . . [Laughter] . . . of the sizes.

WJTM: Me, too, but it's because you need all these fabrics with you, right?

EWS: Yes. I don't know. I don't really understand what the origin of it is, but I have a fantastic interest in them and, of course, in style and fashion. I've always been interested in that. I know a great deal about it—costumes. But it goes back, I suppose, to the sense of engagement with those wax figures. For me, they were lifelike, but foreign and strange. I recall that when I became interested in painting, I was also very interested in the texture. I mean the physical texture of what the painter was trying to do. And one of the fascinations I had with Rodin, for example, was his representations of gowns, of folds, of density, of material. That was very interesting.

WJTM: Yes, this is all beginning to come together for me, because I see this as also linked to your interest again in Goya, and the way the integument of the body, even the flesh itself, seems to become part of the paint and to flow off the frame of the body.

EWS: Exactly. I mean, you could call that a fetish if you like, but what's important for me about it is that it's not inaccessible, it's not like a precious object. I've no interest in jewels, for example, at all. I mean, they don't say anything to me. And decoration—in the tradition from which I come—is very interesting to me, but it's decoration of a fairly consistent kind. It's

arabesque, it's floral rather than animal—that sort of thing. I'm fascinated by that. One of the ways I listen to music is to listen to that, as well. That's why I'm particularly interested in counterpoint. It's patterns against each other, with each other, not alone. The other thing has to do with the way I grew up and the place I grew up. Certainly after Palestine, well, even in Palestine, I was always conscious of prohibitions on places and objects to which I couldn't go. I mean, Jerusalem, for example, is a very hieratic and ritualized city, where one could go to certain places but one couldn't go to others. Particularly in places like the Holy Sepulcher, where I was very early made aware of not being able to go in or not being welcome into the Greek Orthodox, or the Catholic, or the Armenian Churches. It was a church of many divisions, and some of them were accessible and others were not. So there was always a sense of prohibition and remoteness in those places. The same in Egypt, where we were foreigners, basically. There was our familiar space at home, but once you came out of the house, the city was divided—this was during the monarchy—into areas that were hierarchical—where the king was and where the aristocracy lived. I remember one of my earliest experiences, which had a lot to do with the writing of *Orientalism*, when I was walking in the Gezira Club of which we were members. It was a famous enclave built by the British. The members were mostly foreign, although there were some local members. I was thrown out by the secretary, who was a friend of my father's. I tried to say to him . . . He said, "Don't you know that Arabs are not allowed here?" And I said, "Yes, but we're members." And he said, "Don't argue with me boy, get out!" It was that sense of forbidden space that really sowed, I think, the seeds of my rebellion against the hieratic and the fetishistic and the ritualized and the idolatrous. I felt the need always to go against those prohibitions and those statutes and those forbidden places. The urge to enter those places usually cost me quite dear, going into places where I wasn't wanted, which is what I felt I was doing in *Orientalism*.

WJTM: Your idea being to bring some illumination into those dark or inaccessible places?

EWS: Illumination, but also some disposition to mock them and to show that they were, after all, constructions, and not divinely endowed or somehow spontaneously created. You understand what I mean?

WJTM: Yes. Growing up a Roman Catholic, with veiled tabernacles and sacred icons, how could I not?

EWS: And that's why I've always been so interested in Vico, because Vico was the first writer who taught me that human history is painstakingly made the way you might make a model, or an object, and not endowed with any particularly sacred quality, and therefore, it was the province of the philosopher or the scientist to be able to look at any part of human history with the same secular scrutiny without regard for idols. That's why he was a great admirer of Francis Bacon. I remember I first read Bacon when I was a freshman or sophomore at Princeton, and he fascinated me with the notion of the idol and the tribe and the cave and so on and so forth. So the notion of de-idolizing has always been very important to me.

WJTM: But at the same time, it sounds to me as if you're conceding, at least to the possibility of a certain limited fetishism in yourself that you don't see as equivalent with this mystified, dominant ideology.

EWS: You know, I'll tell you . . . Ever since I got ill, I realize that all this stuff that I care about—for example, my interest in *the* piano, in *my* piano . . . I don't use, as you know, computers; I use pens, and I have a very large collection of pens. All these objects that mean a lot to me I feel are easily dispensable tomorrow, because I realize how transitory it is, and I find myself, in a funny way, sort of living the way that passage describes—you know the passage, I've quoted it many times—from Hugh of Saint-Victor, where the person who is the stranger everywhere is somehow at home but not loving the world too much—you know—you're moving on.

WJTM: Yes.

EWS: I have that sense, actually, quite strongly developed, perhaps since I've been ill.

WJTM: Edward, there is one long, last question I want to ask you about the way you reconcile your aestheticism with your politics. I'm thinking of the way you negotiate the tension between your identity as a "high-modernist aesthete," which I take is not an insult for you . . . [Laughter] . . . and your role as a committed political activist. One of the things that's always struck me as remarkable about your career, your writing, is your ability to somehow negotiate the tension between those two things in a marvelous, intricate way. How do you conceive of the relation between art and politics? You consistently affirm a respect for the formal autonomy of the arts and resist reductions of artistic forms to political or ideological issues.

EWS: Right.

WJTM: Yet it's clear at the same time that all your criticism insists on the interweaving of aesthetics and politics, and I wanted to ask how you feel, on reflection, you've negotiated this tension, and also to ask you, more personally, whether you've ever felt baffled or torn by your dual commitments to art and politics, or whether it has just seemed that they are, in your experience, one and the same thing?

EWS: Well, it's certainly not the latter. They're not one and the same thing. And *baffled* is an excellent word for what I often feel with an art whose ideological or political origins are simply irreconcilable with the aesthetic object. The example that always comes to my mind is Wagner. There's no question at all that Wagner was a horrible person in every conceivable respect. But it's very, very difficult to negotiate the leap that you must make between his overt, explicit, endlessly repeated sentiments on the one hand and his music on the other. There's a, there's a . . . you could call it a mystery, you could call it fundamentally irreconcilable . . . there is something there that simply defies comprehension. I think that's probably true of other individual works and artists and their political background. On the other hand, I mean, I don't see how one could write about somebody like Wagner or Delacroix, for example, without taking into account the political context from which they emerge. So what I try to do—whether successfully or not, I can't tell—what I try to do is, in the re-creation of the work or the interpretation of the work, dramatize and present the circumstances—I mean the political circumstances, the historical circumstances, cultural circumstances, ideological circumstances—and try to make the work more interesting as a result without reducing it. I mean, it's much easier to see this in the rereadings of texts for me or in the restaging and reconceiving of musical works, because there you can actively intervene to point the work in a particular direction, to stress certain things, to connect, as I tried to do with Jane Austen, some of the problematic aspects of her tacit endorsement of slavery, not at all to blame her but to connect her to an emancipatory strain of interpretation that comes after her with West Indian writers themselves. To read her along with C. L. R. James, along with the history of colonialism, the history of slavery and so on, trying to reunderstand that history, which in the case of her novels, is occluded or at best marginal. So, that's what I try to do. It's very hard, but it seems to be the most interesting thing about the criticism and interpretation of great works of art.

WJTM: I agree. It is very hard, and I'm struck by the fact that you, of all people, experience it as hard, because you seem to pull it off with such

virtuosity so many times, and I think the rest of us are all looking to see how you do it.

EWS: Yes. But I don't think there's any method or secret. There isn't any clue or pattern to it, except the basic one, which is that a great work of art is not an ideological statement, pure and simple.

WJTM: Right.

EWS: And vice versa. I mean, no ideological statement, pure and simple, can become a great work of art. I mean, it's very difficult. You know, it is as Sartre says about Paul Valery: that he was a petit bourgeois. But not every petit bourgeois is a Valery.

WJTM: [Laughter]

EWS: And that's very salutary to keep that in mind. And I think the final point, perhaps the most interesting point, is that there is a pleasure, there's a satisfaction of it's own, that comes with working through this particular type of irreconcilability. And that's why Adorno interests me so much and why the Hegelian tradition has always made me feel suspicious, because there's always the subsumption of contradictions and irreconcilabilities in the higher synthesis, and I don't believe in that synthesis at all. So then you have to have a certain amount of skepticism, too . . .

WJTM: . . . and a certain kind of willingness to stand on very precarious ground . . .

EWS: Oh, absolutely.

WJTM: This is why, for me, the figure of the tightrope walker . . . You're capable of falling . . .

EWS: A walker, or the other one that I like is the circus performer who has whirling plates on those rods, which he has to keep twirling around, otherwise they'll fall . . . and there are always too many, and they are always in danger of falling. But, I mean, if that's not what we're doing, then what the hell *are* we doing?

WJTM: [Laughter] Dropping plates, breaking china everywhere, I suppose.

EWS: By the way, have we finished?

WJTM: No. I wanted to follow up just one more step with this fascinating discussion and that's to push a little further to each side of the art/politics

division. Would you agree that if you're not capable of mediating or somehow serving these two masters that it's going to be in some way reductive to both your appreciation, your understanding, of art and the quality of the politics you profess? I think it's obvious with the artistic side that if you simply reduce art to ideology, it's not very interesting.

EWS: No.

WJTM: But I wonder about the opposite side. Suppose politics is just politics. Or is nothing but the art and craft of producing power. To what extent does politics need your kind of aesthetic sensibility, your kind of formalism, to be authentic politics?

EWS: Now, that's a very good question, because, in the end, you see, if you get stuck in the trap into which Foucault inserted himself and was never able to get out except by exiting through subjectivity and the care of the self and all the rest of it, which to me, is uninteresting, then you have to regard politics as not just the production/reduction of power but also as constituting a very complex and rich tapestry of historical experience. Most of which, alas, in the writings of political scientists and polemicists, simply is never given a chance. That's why, for example, I am much more interested in the politics of loss and dispossession than I am in the politics of triumph and fulfillment. I wrote a couple of years ago a long essay on lost causes, and it's clear that you can regard politics that way. I mean, you could look, for example, at E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, which is a history of loss, but out of it comes ennobling and interesting experiences of the sort that don't make it into Parliament or don't necessarily get recorded by historians. So politics has to be more than just the struggle for power. It's a struggle for fulfillment, it's a struggle for recognition, it's a struggle for acknowledgment, it's a struggle for survival, it's a struggle for betterment and liberation. That's what interests me in the end, not the people who are plotting a coup. I mean that sort of Blanquist view of politics. But the process by which civil institutions are built—usually subverted and corrupted, at least in my experience of the politics of the Third World—with a renewed commitment to ideals of human emancipation, enlightenment, and community—it seems to me, in the end, that that's what it's all about. Now, of course, in that there is a terribly important role for the aesthetic. Not as an illustration of it but as part of that same struggle.

WJTM: Central to the practice itself.

EWS: I mean, that's the kind of politics that interest me.

WJTM: As you're speaking, I'm reminded of William Blake's name, his proper name for the artist and prophet. You remember the name of the character? His name is "Los."

EWS: Oh, "Los." Yes, very good. And, of course, reversed, it's "Sol."

WJTM: The traditional Apollonian artist who's above it all . . .

EWS: No, of course, one isn't above it. I mean, I don't believe that one is above it.

WJTM: Right. You are with Blake's Los, the prophet, down in the basement.