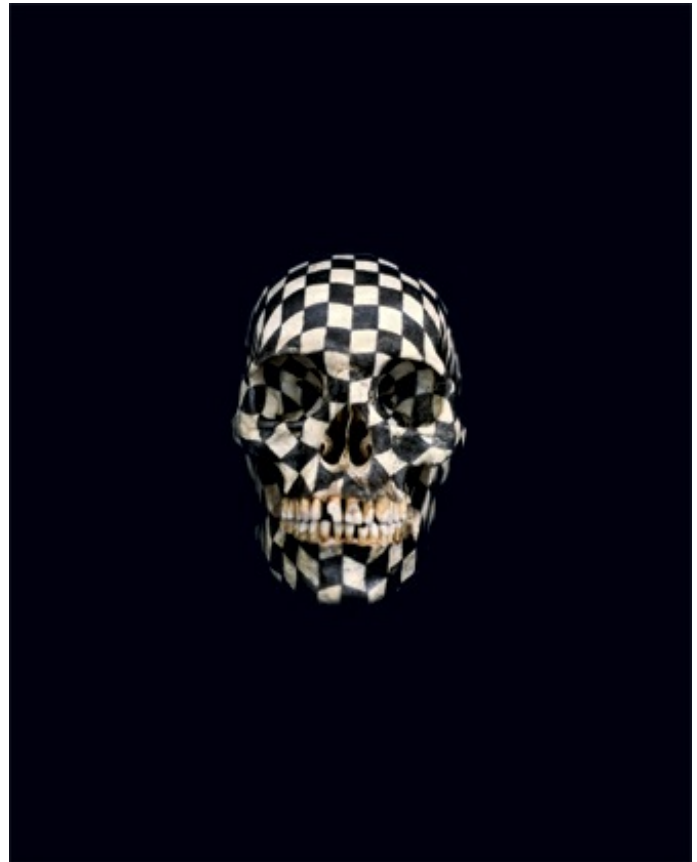


# The reign of gnomonic truths

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Gabriel Orozco, *Black Kites*  
Perspective (front horizontal), 1997.  
Photo: courtesy of the artist &  
kurimanzutto, Mexico



## The reign of gnomonic truths

**By Mark Kingwell**

The multi-artist *exhibition Universal Code: Art and Cosmology in the Information Age*, shown at The Power Plant in Toronto during the summer of 2009, had all the earmarks of a meretricious celebration of bogus commonality. Planned to mark the International Year of Astronomy, the show offered work “against the backdrop of developments within contemporary culture ranging from DNA research and the politics of the night sky to Morse code, corporate communication networks and migration patterns.” By “drawing inspiration from the cosmos,” the exhibition reflected “on the changing nature of time and space.”(1)

This is the sort of rhetoric that gives the adjective “universal” a bad name, well intentioned everything-and-nothing blather that can suck the air out of any room in which it is read or uttered. The oddly dated phrase “information age,” meanwhile, could not fail to arouse suspicion that it was being used ironically — for how could it be used seriously? At the very least, The Power Plant director Gregory Burke, who curated the show, was fixed in the

unenviable position of having to generalize about works so diverse they almost defy classification. (Full disclosure: I am a member of the Board of Directors of The Power Plant but have had no hand in the curation of this or any other show there.)

Consider the depth of the problem. In one of the short essays in *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes delivered a sharp version of his general critique of ahistorical cultural ideology. Reflecting on the Edward Steichen photo exhibition called *The Great Family of Man* — “the greatest exhibition of all time,” according to its Museum of Modern Art catalogue — Barthes penetrated the surface appeal of this collection of more than 500 images of people all over the world at work, play and rest, and revealed a troubling irresponsibility.

“We are at the outset directed to this ambiguous myth of the human ‘community’, which serves as an alibi to a large part of our humanism,” he noted. The myth works in two distinct stages: first, “exoticism is insistently stressed, the infinite variation of the species”; then, “from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced,” an identical human nature beneath “the diversity in skins, skulls and customs.”(2) It is a familiar double manoeuvre, one that the Steichen exhibition by no means invented. The very same manoeuvre haunts the smarmy funeral orations acknowledging that death comes even to the wealthy and powerful. This assertion, in death, of their essential sameness with the rest of mortal humanity is offered precisely to prove something about their difference. Covering over while apparently uncovering is precisely the sort of legerdemain that masks the naturalizing function of all ideology. The cultural myths Barthes analyzes in *Mythologies*, apparently innocuous bits and pieces of cultural effluvium, are in fact narrative strands in a larger movement of placing “nature” at the bottom of history, the lived narrative of real cruelty and exploitation.

The family-of-man conceit, the myth of a shared human condition, is one of the most comprehensive and powerful of these ideological gestures, perhaps, ironically, because of its bland expansiveness. “This is the reign of gnomic truths,” Barthes argued, “the meeting of all the ages of humanity at the most neutral point of their nature, the point where the obviousness of the truism has no longer any value except in the realm of a purely ‘poetic’ language.” The inverted commas around ‘poetic’ — ‘scare quotes’ as they are known — are essential. The ‘poetic’ effect is itself gestural and without determination. “Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justified them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History,” Barthes continues. “[W]e are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some ‘differences’ which we shall here quite simply call ‘injustices’.”(3)

Sentimentality emerges as the basest sort of intellectual failure, one in which we invest a narcissistic self-regard with derivative stocks of self-pity and soft-headed emotion skimmed from our own sense of imminent demise. And such is the appeal of this stew of feelings that a marginal self-awareness even serves its ends by rarefying the conclusion into an assertion

of shared guilt, common sinfulness, or generalized falls away from presumptive grace. We congratulate ourselves both coming and going, just as we doubled diversity with unity in order to keep thought, and hence responsibility, at bay. Celebrate life!

*Universal Code* could easily have fallen into these abysses of meretricious sentiment and phony poetry; luckily, it did not. Indeed, some of the included work makes possible, even demands, new turns of thought in the otherwise inescapable insight of Barthes's analysis from a half-century ago. Maybe there is such a thing as *universal code* after all: not as a smooth erasure of history or even as a regulative ideal, but as a useful moving target, focus of suspicion and belief, celebration and cynicism.

As we move past the dubious claims of the rhetorical frame into actual aesthetic experience, the title phrase mutates into an unstable mixture of irony, dystopian aggression, and genuine wonder, hinting at both the implicit menace and the open awe contained in any conjunction of universality with codedness. That is to say, it is not paranoid to parse the titular sentiment as a plan of generalized translation of the world into digital disposal; but neither is it naive to accept its echo of optimism, that we might all be linked after all.

Some works confront the dark side of globalization. Tania Mouraud's video installation of clacking Indian weavers, *La Fabrique* (2006), with its twelve monitors huddled in a small room, forces viewers into intimate contact with the eyes and faces of the routinely oppressed — and yet, with no possible political or economic reaction to their mordant, accusing gaze. Other works are celebratory: Henrik Hakansson's *Monarch — The Eternal* (2008), a large-screen projection of thousands of the Monarch butterflies returning to Michoacan, Mexico, in winter migration; Katie Paterson's *Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)* (2008), which bounces a Morse transcription of the Beethoven work off the moon and performs the resulting cracked terra-lunar version of the piece on a player grand piano, making an incidental soundtrack to one whole gallery of the show.

There are witty plays on global awareness that turn into arresting visual and physical immersions. Trevor Paglen's *Active Military and Reconnaissance Satellites of the United States of America* (2008), a large transparent globe suspended in the centre of a dark room, revolves in its own light even as small white dots, matching the trajectory of actual satellites, move around the glowing surface. Angela Bullock's *Night Sky: Mars from Venus* (2008), an effectively simple expanse of neoprene and light-emitting diodes, offers the viewer a matte black surface on which scattered star points rise and fall in programmed patterns of varied intensity.

Some small pleasures stay with you long after viewing, deft examples of the *haptic conceptual* in contemporary art; that is, work of big ideas and profound engagements, delivered not as disdain for beauty but with a cheerful belief in its power. *String Theory* (2003), by Antonia Hirsch, is a tiny masterpiece, a hand-sized digital video monitor set into a

gallery wall where its base meets the floor, allowing the distracted visitor to walk right by it. On the blueish screen a slow-motion human figure is skipping rope in an elaborate repeated criss-cross pattern; each time the coiled strands of the rope hit the floor of the screen — and hence of the gallery — a dull thump sounds from behind the wall. This constant heartbeat, coupled with the glowing screen, is mesmerizing and, finally, vertiginous. Watching it, you feel as though you might lose your balance, pitch into the wall, and be swallowed up by the screen.

Taken together, and despite occasional weak entries, *Universal Code* succeeds at something a cynic might have thought impossible. “A really big show about feeling small,” as one daily newspaper had it, the exhibition is a deliberately constructed cabinet of wonders that opens new avenues of thought and movement. Using the odd spatial distribution of The Power Plant — a recovered industrial building on Toronto’s lake front — the show opens doors into small enclosed screening rooms, sends visitors up and down stairs, and pushes them along narrow corridors and into corners.

Perhaps this is the right moment to rethink, or expand, Barthes’s well-founded critique of “the reign of gnomic truths.” Neutralizing history to a bland point of commonality remains a cherished tactic in the evil of banality, the unctuous obliteration of real history. But *Universal Code*’s collective reflection on the physics of consciousness recalls the fact that a point, having location but no dimension, is as expansive as we want it to be. Collapsing to a point initiates an expansion.

It is worth noting that “gnomic” did not always carry the negative connotation of sententious, didactic, or truistic. The word comes from the Greek *gignosko*, to know; and the original gnomic verses were mnemonic devices, poems composed to render useful aphorisms or maxims in, as it were, portable form. They were timeless truths carried in individual memory. And so gnomic becomes the term for the grammatical tense of general claims made without specific temporal extension. (Oxford’s poignant example of this, from *Much Ado About Nothing*: “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more; men were deceivers ever.”) But the very same root, now in its sense as knowing or indicating a fact, gives us gnomon, that part of a sundial that stands upright and, catching the shadow of the sun, indicates what time it is. Time and timelessness compressed, and compressing, ever.

We are forever coding and decoding, constantly recording and playing back. There is no universal code if we mean a master-pattern or a secret-unlocking meta-language. There is only the universality of a mundane miracle, a prosaic paradox: consciousness’ awareness of *itself as particular*. Nature and history meet in the wonder of you and me as we try, now and always, to say things — to ourselves and to each other.

NOTES 1. Excerpt of promotional document from The Power Plant, for the *exhibition Universal Code*. 2. Roland Barthes, “*The Great Family of Man*,” *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973), 100. 3. *Ibid.*, 101.

