

HOW ENCHANTING | David Morgan, professor and chair of religious studies, is the author of *Images at Work: The Material Culture of Enchantment* (Oxford University Press).

Q&A

Enchantment, as you see it, is more than wish-fulfillment or escapism. It changes our relationship to the world, and it involves the little things we do to make the world go our way—tokens, devices, objects, words, images. But in an age of scientific rationality, aren't we beyond enchantment?

I write that modernity is not the era of the scientific eradication of religion, magic, or any other form of enhancement. Telegraphy became a primary metaphor for spiritualism; photography captured the soul and documented spiritual effluvia; the phonograph recorded the sounds of the dead. Electricity was miraculous, and magnetism was a soul-curative. Enchantment is a fundamental part of our humanity. We're wired not just for rational thinking. We feel our way through life with our emotions, our sensations, as much as we do with our reason and our logic.

Even at NASA, right?

At NASA, the most scientific minds animate objects by applying human names to them. They invest in a satellite, which travels to the far end of the solar system, as if it were kind of a child. They name it. They name its components. They talk about it so tenderly. They humanize this piece of technology because in some ways it is an extension of us; we think of it as our offspring going out to space.

Do we see enchantment in everyday life?

Enchantment is at work when we look at an advertisement, or the clothing worn by a passerby, or the car someone is driving, and imagine ourselves similarly arrayed. We may be so persuaded by the image's appeal, so moved by the promise

of its power to transform us from one thing into another, that we actually purchase the item. Consumerism seems premised on enchantment, so that a commodity magically will confer on its owner a new status or place in the world.

You write that enchantment often involves imagery of one kind or another. But we usually think of images as just things to look at and not as being "at work."

Images are not just messages; they are agents. They do things. And they do things to us: They scare us, they inspire us, they threaten us, they comfort us.

How can images scare us?

What makes things terrifying is what exposes our impotence and threatens our sense of ease and control over the universe. The eighteenth-century concept of the sublime often meant showing people facing a vast ocean or a towering mountain. The human presence is dwarfed. That's what J.M.W. Turner does in his paintings. He blurs the horizon. He takes away the principle of stability. It's disorienting. Some other force is stronger than you; it overwhelms you.

Maybe more typically, images can be comforting, can help orient or anchor us.

I remember interviewing a guy at a church in Chicago where, it was said, a picture of Mary began weeping. I was the typical

secular scholar saying, "Oh, this is pretty incredible. What do you think about this?" And he goes, "It's not incredible at all. Our Lady does this. This is how she manifests her will to us. She shows us she is with us. Pictures of Mary have been weeping for centuries." So he helped me understand that it only looked supernatural and weird to an outsider. In his world, that's what the image of Mary does.

What role does chance play in the forming of images and the work of enchantment?

When a random occurrence matches a need, the result

may appear mysterious but not particularly random. We see in the world around us what matters most to us. Enchantment curbs randomness by making it the agent of divine or superhuman action; it helps make the universe a friendlier, more sympathetic place for us. Religion, magic, and art all manage chance. By doing so, they help make the world go our way.

In the book you refer to *The Wizard of Oz*. What does that illustrate about enchantment?

It's a story about estrangement and return. Dorothy had been alienated from her world by the menace of losing her dog. And she found her world once again only by following the yellow brick road. That's what enchantments are successful at doing. Losing yourself, and then re-emerging to find your place in the world is what's so powerful. —Robert J. Bliwise, Photo by Les Todd

