

Michael Taussig
**The Stories
Things Tell And
Why They Tell
Them**

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I never thought that a thing like a burned match, or a scrap of paper in the mud, or a fallen leaf, or a rusty worthless nail might have a soul. The Yorikke taught me otherwise.

– B. Traven, *The Death Ship*

1. It Is As If the Arrow Is Thinking

For seven months, Juan Downey lived in the Amazon forest with some Yanomami Indians. In 1979 he made a video called *The Laughing Alligator* about this experience. There are many stories in this movie, but to my mind the stories are secondary to the filmic quality of film, to rhythms of light and shade, flicker and sheen. The stories are secondary to the way the collage of images tells many stories simultaneously. And of course, there is always the face – the human face – and the nearly naked body, all filmed in loving close-up. In these sequences, sound is enormously important, all the more so when it is absent, as with the episode towards the end of the video where a young man binds a blue feather to the tail-end of an arrow braced tight against the smooth skin of his shirtless chest. The screen fills with the feather set into the shaft, twirled slowly in irregular stops and starts.

It is as if the arrow is thinking, inseparable as it is from the body as both tool and beauty. First the right hand moves back and forth along the naked thigh, back and forth, rolling fibers into a thread, which will be used to bind the feather to the arrow. The thigh is an anvil, a hard surface for rolling the fibers. Then the body becomes a vice, holding the shaft of the arrow tight in the axilla. Body and arrow are unified. Epitome of ease, the man sits on a low stool, his body the workshop of the world.

It is miraculous, this feather seemingly turning on its own, reflecting many shades of blue as the man slowly twirls the arrow while binding the feather to ensure smooth flight. You sense the arrow flying, taking you along with it. Everything seems so easy, unhurried, deft. Like God signing off on the creation of the world.

This is the methodical work of a magic at once technical and aesthetic, demonstrating Walter Benjamin's riff on Paul Valery's idea of the skilled artisan possessing a certain accord of soul, hand, and eye – that same accord that provides the basis for the storyteller as the artisan of experience.¹ The art of the storyteller that Benjamin saw as having its origin in the traveler and the artisan returning to his or her natal village is the same art that the traveler Juan Downey makes about Indians for an audience in the metropole. And is not Downey an artisan too, an artisan with a clunky 1970s

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portable video camera that he takes into the forest? But in this case the power differentials – who is telling this story? – are continuously brought to the surface by self-mockery and good humor, as when the alligator of myth with fire in its belly is made to laugh and belch out its secret for the benefit of the Indians, who have tricked it into laughing. Thus does violence – the violence of the alligator, the violence of fire – pass into the realm of story, a story that makes us laugh too, revealing the close connection between laughter and violence, like the connection between the comfort and violence of fire itself.

Fire is certainly useful, especially for cooking the bones of the dead to a fine ash, which is mixed into beer and drunk by the survivors. What a way to go! Downey is now dead and in this movie he is on record as saying that he wants to be drunk like this too, to pass into the body of the Other as “funerary architecture.”

So who is telling stories nowadays? And who is telling the story about stories? Is there in fact a Great Chain of Storytellers, despite Benjamin’s claim that storytelling died away with the demise of craft and with the accelerated pace of life in the big city? He makes it seem as if the arrow has stopped thinking and has flown away. Can it not still be found where people work, not at binding feathers but where things, not people, assume the task of the storyteller?

2. The Death Ship

Take mystery man B. Traven’s 1927 account of a sailor on the Death Ship, a decrepit tramp steamer plowing the seven seas towards its rendezvous with death. Let us emphasize how Benjamin is as aware of the importance sailors play in storytelling as he is of the role of death in authorizing the storyteller. You get this in one swoop with the very title *The Death Ship*.

Publishers never knew the mysterious B. Traven other than as a post office box in Mexico City. There is a story that he was a German anarchist who escaped to Mexico after the Munich Soviet was routed in 1918. He identified with the plight of the Indians of lowland Chiapas on the Lacandon side, and in sturdy, laconic prose edged with humor, wrote stories about their lives during the Mexican Revolution. Sometimes it seems like he is one of them. Other times he seems like a figure in one of his novels, the seasoned revolutionary suspicious of all leaders, the Wobbly sympathizer who hung out with Sandino in Veracruz during the oil workers’ strike, the one who advised burning all the municipal records. He saw the big picture in the detail, like the global market in the mahogany forests of the Lacandon where fifty years later another revolutionary movement began with the new Zapatistas.

Then in 1926, in the middle of writing these stories, he wrote *The Death Ship*, which has nothing to do with Mexico but concerns a droll US sailor at the end of WWI, stranded in Europe because he lost his passport and sailor’s papers. Epitome of innocence with an endearing, almost childlike cunning (like a Brecht character or a figure in the fairytales Walter Benjamin wrote about in “The Storyteller”), this good man without papers, humble to a fault, can’t help but bring out, to the point of humor, the mix of absurdity and inhumanity in the routines of the modern state, especially with respect to immigrants. Hunted down by the police of Belgium, then Holland, and then France, unable to take a job as a sailor for lack of papers, he is shunted from prison to prison, country to country. It is a farce. Does he complain? No. What he does is scratch his head in wonder as if on the planet Mars. He has become a thing amidst things.

Confined in a French prison, he is made to perform an absurdly tedious task. Month after month the prison authorities have him count and move things from one side of the room to the other and back again, forming little piles of 140 items each. What are these items? They are “very peculiar-looking nameless things stamped out of bright tinned sheet iron.”² Nobody knows what they are. Some say they are parts of a dirigible to be used in the next war. Others say they are parts of a machine gun, while others say they are for submarines, tanks, or airplanes. Nobody suggests that they might be something useful to mankind. Keep counting.

It makes the people around him especially sore when he tells them he is American; he insinuates that because America saved Europe in WWI, they should help him, not imprison him. Then he realizes his error, tells them he is German, and they love him. This is especially true when he is imprisoned in Spain, the poorest of all the countries in which he is held captive, yet with the one with the most generous people.

Fishing off the wharf in Barcelona, our make-believe German is hypnotized at the offer of a job on a rusty tramp steamer that does not ask for papers. The water surrounding the ship is stained with rust and paint peeling off the hull. This is the Yorikke, the Death Ship. At once womb and tomb, it appears to have been painted white way back in the time of Abraham of Ur of the Chaldees, but it is now layered over with as many different colors as are known to exist.³ Her masts are like “branches reaching out from a fantastic tree in North Dakota in November.”⁴ When he first sees her, our sailor drops his fishing line. He cannot believe his eyes and bursts out laughing. But then the ship starts to tremble, frightened of going out to sea. “I could not remember,” says

the sailor, “ever having seen anything in the world that looked so dreadful and hopeless, and so utterly lost, as did the Yorikke. I shivered.”⁵

The flag is barely a flag, pale, flimsy, and shredded. The ship’s name can barely be made out on the hull, nor that of its home port. As for the name Yorikke? What sort of name is that? Just like Exxon Valdez, I guess. Or B. Traven. None of the sailors on the Yorikke have names, passports, or nationalities. Here too you become a thing amidst things.

It is our sailor’s job to stoke the furnaces and work the winch on deck that hauls up the ash. For the life of him, he can’t work the winch. It is antiquated, cumbersome, violent, and unpredictable – so long as you treat it as a thing without a soul, that is. If you lose control, it will smash you and itself, which essentially means crippling the ship. Another sailor shows him the trick to work the winch: “Pushing the lever in or pushing it out one thirty-second of an inch too far made all the difference.” Our sailor resolves to “say Gracious Lady to her. Maybe if I consider that winch a person, then she will do it and work with papa.”

“Hook on!”

“Heave up,” came the call.

“Hello Duchess, come, let’s do it together. Come, come, come, up with the shirt.”⁶

So there is a lot of deceit here, deceit and conceit, or at least a conceit – a conceit that rolls over into a trick, as with a shaman’s trick, which lies midway between sleight of hand and art. After all, what is a trick? (Take the wing of an airplane, for example.)

First the worker is out to seduce the machine, which, naturally, is now a she-being. Indeed a duchess. This intimates a love relationship, erotic at that. It is also as if an adult is cajoling a child, perhaps a sick child, with flattery and, naturally, a good deal of make-believe. In which case he is seducing the child for the child’s sake, not necessarily his own.

In any event we need now to focus on the trick explained and demonstrated to the sailor, which is very technical, concerning that one thirty-second of an inch. This requires a skill as highly attuned as the man binding the blue feather. In both cases, control of the body is paramount. The ship plunges and heaves. The man braces his legs. He is stiff but flexible, his legs are like pylons but his arms have to be relaxed, striving to move but one thirty-second of an inch and no more.

We need to focus on the concept of the trick and its relation to magic and to things that tell stories.

We might think of a trick as something fraudulent. But then, as with a modern conjuror, fraud too requires an exact mimesis of nature.

Think of the airplane wing. Think of the blue feather ensuring that the arrow flies straight. So we need to be thinking of the trick as something scientific and real, bearing a scrupulous understanding and manipulation of things, including the human body in relation to such things. But the trick slides, it seduces, it cajoles (“Hey Duchess!”), it knows and enjoys the leap beyond the thingness of things.

Is this why the sailor goes to such lengths to inform us that the winch is the same winch used by old man Noah? It belongs to pre-Flood times: “All the little goblins of those far-off times which were to be destroyed by the Flood had found refuge in the Yorikke, where they lived in all the corners and nooks. The worst of these little evil spirits had taken up quarters in this winch.”⁷ The stoke-hold is dimly illuminated by two heavy iron lamps – the same ones this ghostly ship carried when she was sailing to Carthage from Tyre in “the old days.” You can see lamps like these in the British Museum. But those on the Yorikke use wicks made from rags in the engine room and are fueled by spent oil from the ship’s engines, which of course did not exist in “the old days.”

“The old days” is actually a talismanic phrase and phase that ushers in prehistory and hence the enchanted world in which things spoke to man. That is Schiller’s understanding, and it goes along with what is felt to be a certain lack or loss of poetry and ritual in workaday life. But, you ask, has that really disappeared? Does enchantment not resurface under certain conditions, maybe extreme conditions, in this world of machines, corporate control, and consumerism that we call modernity?

Here you might do well to think of an intellectual and artistic strategy like the one I take from Benjamin, that of demystification and reenchantment – facilitated, in my mind, by humor, as we find with our sailor such that prehistory gushes forth in the present, altering the existing distinctions between land, animals, and people. This is the same “return of the repressed” I come across with much of South American shamanism at times of menstruation, pregnancy, sorcery, and sickness.

The sailor’s story is an outstanding instance of this return of the repressed, and hence of what Benjamin was getting at with his idea of a *profane illumination*, at once mystical yet down to earth. When suggesting that the storyteller borrows his authority from death, Benjamin says that death sinks the story into nature – or, to be more exact, into natural history. Yet such is the movement inspired by death that the story lifts off from natural history into something supernatural. Benjamin writes: “The lower Leskov descends on the scale of created things, the more obviously does his way of viewing

things approach the mystical.”⁸

This must be why this ship of death tells stories to her crew. Nobody on the ship speaks the same language but they all tell stories to each other. Yet the best stories are the ones the ship tells. “The crew may leave a ship,” points out B. Traven, but “their stories never leave.”

A story penetrates the whole ship and every part of it, the iron, the steel, the wood, all the holds, the coal-bunkers, the engine-hall, the stoke-hold, even the bilge. Out of these parts, full of hundreds and thousands of stories, tales and yarns, the ship tells the stories over again, with all the details and minor twists. She tells the stories to her best comrades – that is to the members of the crew. She tells the stories better and more exactly than they could ever be told in print.⁹

Let us pause for a moment and note the chronology of cause and effect here. It is the sailors who tell each other stories – stories about the ship or stimulated by the ship – and then the ship itself comes alive, hoards the stories, retells them, and makes up its own stories, which are presumably compounds of the stories of countless sailors told over millennia. It is thus storytelling that animates the ship and keeps it going – storytelling and the coal the stokers shovel into the furnaces.

Our sailor says that a ship can function fine with a crew but no skipper, while a ship will never sail with a skipper and no crew. This is why the ship always takes the side of the crew, he continues, because the crew cares for the ship while the skipper’s responsibility is to the company that owns the ship.¹⁰

The crew lays claim to a different kind of possession than the owners and the officers. Theirs is an intimacy that comes about through their work. In *The Death Ship* it is not the sparkling sea and ravishing sunsets that feature in the sailor’s tale, but labor below decks. The work-site is minutely described in a patient, detailed, down to earth way that, without fuss or fanfare, nevertheless has a visionary and mythical edge. Why is this? How can such opposed philosophies – materialist and spiritual – be not only reconciled but mutually reinforcing?

When introduced to his workspace below decks, where he will shovel coal into the furnace for fifteen hours a day, the sailor looks down into it and muses:

The depth appeared to have no limit. At the bottom below I saw the underworld. It was a smoke-filled hell, brightened up by

darting spears of reddish light which seemed to dash out of different holes and disappear as suddenly as they had come...As if he had been born in this thick smoke, the naked shape of a human being stepped into the center of the hall. He was black from a thick color coal dust which covered all of his body, and the sweat ran down him in streams, leaving glittering traces in the soot of his body. He stared motionless in the direction from which the reddish lights came flaring out. Now he moved heavily about and seized a long iron poker. He stepped a pace forward, bent over, and suddenly it looked as if he were swallowed up by the sea of flames which enwrapped him.¹¹

The most dangerous problem concerns the grates in the furnace. Heavy metal bars, weighing between eighty and one hundred pounds, have to be placed on the grates to hold the coal. The problem is that because the grates are very old, the bars are liable slip out of place and cause the ship to lose way, unless the bars are retrieved from the white-hot coals. Heavy seas aggravate this situation because the Yorikke demands extra steam and the workspace bucks like a horse.

The stoke-hold was ridiculously small. The space between the boilers and the back of the stoke-hold was considerably smaller than the length of the fire-channels beneath the boilers. Pulling out the poker from the furnace could not be done straight away, because the end of the poker hit the back of the stoke-hold long before the whole poker was out of the fire. Therefore the fireman had to go sideways and jerk the poker up and down to get it out. He had to do a real dance about the stoke-hold to handle the poker properly.¹²

He had to dance – to trick the fire.

In heavy weather the fireman was thrown about. He could fall forward face first onto the red-hot poker or backward onto white-hot slags. Other times he would lose his clogs (they had no real shoes or boots) and step onto a hill of embers.¹³

Yet – and yet! – the sailors take great pride in their work. As our sailor notes, “They feel as proud of a job well done as the Harvard guys feel when they have won a football game.”¹⁴ Only no one cheers for this soot-blackened gang.

It is hard to understand this pride in utterly degrading, exploitative work. And of all the degrading jobs on the Yorikke, two stand out: keeping a straight course and providing power, which I take to parallel telling a story and stoking

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coal. "Some day when you know its all over," a fellow worker explains to our sailor, "you wish to have the true satisfaction of having done at least something while you were alive on this crazy earth."

What I mean is, to stand by the wheel, say, in the dirtiest weather hell and devils can think of and then, in such weather, keep the course straight. That is something which nothing in the whole world can be compared with. No honorable trade, no matter how thick and honey it may be, is like that. Damn my soul.¹⁵

And this applies especially to stoking the furnace, the lowest, dirtiest, and hardest job on the ship. It is stoking that provides the energy that pushes the boat forwards and makes it obedient to the man at the wheel. Maybe it's a shame that a good sailor has to shovel coal, but "it has to be done to keep the can going and somebody has to do it," continues the fellow worker. "It gets to be fun!" To throw six hundred shovels of coal and do it fine even in heavy weather "so that the fire stares at you in admiration, you feel so happy you just could go and kiss that mountain of coal."¹⁶

Well, that is one way of looking at the situation, and it coexists with a loony sense of reality – operatic yet serious – as the gods rear up, especially Emperor Caesar Augustus, to whom our sailor pays mock obeisance: "Don't you worry, you will always have gladiators." *Happy?*, asks our sailor. "I am the happiest man on earth to have the honor to fight and die for you, you god imperator."¹⁷ Other times it is Emperor Capitalism. The idols have returned.

The fire stares back in admiration. The stoker prays to the grate-bars not to fall. The Yorikke teaches our sailor a big lesson for which he is grateful: "to see the soul in apparently lifeless objects."

Before I shipped on the Yorikke I never thought that a thing like a burned match, or a scrap of paper in the mud, or a fallen leaf, or a rusty worthless nail might have a soul. The Yorikke taught me otherwise. Since then life for me has become a thousand times richer, even without a motor car or a radio. No more can I ever feel alone. I feel I am a tiny part of the universe.¹⁸

The extremity of work creates an animistic world. How and why this happens is, as they say, another story, an old, old story, a fairy tale made of the merging of the ancient world of the great Flood with the sickness that is the modern world. When Benjamin cites Valéry on the coordination

of hand, soul, and eye required by craft, he refers to the same world discovered by the sailors on the Death Ship. The sailors are not taken in by loyalty to the factory or to the system. Instead, they come to see work and the materials of their work in terms of justice to the qualities of things, to what has been called "the parliament of things" unknown or exploited by current modes of production.¹⁹ It is the extremity of their situation which leads to this discovery, just as shamans and great storytellers find their measure in death, and humor.

The "liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man," writes Benjamin.²⁰ But it would be hard to call our sailor "a liberated man." He is not liberated when he shovels coal sixteen hours a day, shoeless and starving. He is not liberated when his ship sinks, leaving him, like Ishmael, adrift in the storming sea. It is his pal who is liberated, if that's the word, floating in the water alongside him, liberated through death, eventually finding that one place to which you can go where they don't ask for your papers or passport. Our sailor, however, is left in the midst of the great nothingness that is the empty sea, once again a thing amidst things, like he was in the French prison counting pieces of tin. "The storyteller," concludes Benjamin, "he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story."²¹ That is certainly true today, for the few who even get the time to tell a story, let alone experience one.

Yet to put it this way overlooks the brio – the animation – at work in every line of this tale. For what seems truly at stake is not only the exploitation of people and things but the conviction that the product of labor belongs to the worker, not the capitalist – "belongs" not so much as property but as something engaged with, for it is the worker who understands work, not the bosses, and it is the worker who keeps the infrastructure of the world going – keeps the ship on a straight course with a good head of steam regardless of official papers.

And this is why things are animated aboard the Death Ship.

3. Wages of Fear

Things come alive in the 1953 film *The Wages of Fear*, the title of which takes us once more into the world of wage labor. Here it is not a death ship but a death truck that is the focus of attention, as four men drive two trucks laden with dynamite over mountainous roads in a Latin American country to extinguish a fire in an oil well. As the unrelenting tension keeps us on the edge of our seats, many things come alive,

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especially the tires of the trucks, tires that so frequently fill the screen that they deserve to be listed in the credits as *dramatis personae*.

I say tires but what I recall most vividly is a single tire, a generic tire, filling out the screen with its tireness, the Platonic form of a tire. Much has been made of the viewer's body entering into the cinema screen, and just as much has been made of the opposite, of the image entering into the viewer's body. This film is all that, in spades. Your body strains to assist those mighty tires that inch by inch make their way across inhospitable terrain. Your body bends sideways to imitate a circle, urging on the tire which, believe it or not, you feel communicating with you. Blood pounds in your ears, in synch with the staccato rhythms of the powerful diesel motor of the truck. "There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language," writes Benjamin. (314) You become the tire. You become the truck. Of course, the fear-ridden drivers covered with sweat are important too. They are alive too. But they have become rigid with fear. Their thoughts, like ours, are on their terrifying cargo, which has the capacity to come alive in one terrible explosion. This is why your imagination finds succor in the repeated close-ups that fill the screen. The dark treads in the tire are like nests, homes away from home. A silly thought of mine, no doubt, yet the treads offer some comfort, a certain grip on life, hence more life, more alive, more movie, than anything else in the film.

It is contagious, this transformation of mere things, such as tires, into living beings. All things start to tremble and metamorphose into animate being. Now the truck shows its true colors. It is no longer a mere truck – if it ever was – but a prehistoric monster with its haunting siren and lights hanging off it like globular eyes that not only see but devour. Always we are surrounded by the throbbing of that diesel motor. When one of the trucks has to drive on a wooden ramp jutting out over the edge of the mountain, which the men have constructed so the truck can navigate around a sharp curve, the wooden beams come to life. They bend. They snap. And down below we espy the lazy river that spells certain death. Those tires again. They spin. They skid. The truck shakes itself in one galvanic movement. A cable supporting the ramp catches on a hook at the back of the truck. Agonizingly, as the truck inches up the ramp, the wire slowly bends, the metal hook bends, you hear it scream, the truck advances slower and slower, the metal hook bends some more and, as in spring time, nature comes alive, only its not daffodils blossoming but nature raw in tooth and claw that comes tearing out at us as the whole damn ramp

disintegrates in front of our eyes. Suddenly freed, the wire snakes up high into the air, a whiplash into the sky

Along with the trucks carrying dynamite, the other great animated being in the film is oil. (Here we become ever so mindful that this entire movie can be seen as an allegory of the satanic promise of oil.) Oil comes to life when one of the two trucks explodes, leaving a gaping hole in the oil pipeline running alongside the road. Slowly and quietly, out pours thick, black, sluggish oil. It is alive too, is it not? It contains the aliveness that shall drive the machines of the West. It is alive in the sinister way it oozes relentlessly like black treacle to fill up the crater in the road caused by the explosion. (What do I mean here, calling it sinister? Only humans are sinister, right?) This lake of oil is alive, a rising force that cannot be stopped. It rises higher and higher.

It is already three feet high, black and glistening. It is alive as it claims like an invisible hand the man walking backwards through it while he guides the driver of the remaining truck through the black lake. The driver cannot stop. Forces more alive than he compel him to gun the engine. The truck passes over the body of the man walking backwards, who has slipped and fallen into the oil. He surfaces, twisted like an old log, only the whites of his eyes showing in a body completely covered with sticky black oil. He has become a thing. The oil is alive. Not he. Only his eyes are alive. Not he. He has become natural history.

Now the truck is truly medieval, like the Death Ship, a creature emergent from ancient history and passing, as Benjamin would have it, into natural history on its way to elsewhere. The radiator is enormous, like the portcullis of a castle gate or the gaping mouth of a giant sea clam. Across the massive front bumper is the word EXPLOSIVES in huge letters, no longer a word but a sign. The hulking machine comes at us, a ghost ship advancing across a lake of oil. The thingest of things, trucks and oil, have become mythical beings. The driver cannot stop. The oil is rising too fast. Where are those tires now, those more alive than alive tires, covered with oil, deep in oil, finding their way across the hidden bottom of the crater? Here they are, emerging from the lake of oil, shaking themselves free as the body of the man crushed by those very same tires rolls sluggishly like an old log adrift on the oil.

4. Story and Trick

Shamans make mighty conjurers, we are told. They can throw voices, talk to spirits, travel the skies, and walk the depths of the ocean. They can extract strange objects from their bodies or from the bodies of the sick, and just as easily

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make those objects disappear. In the twinkling of an eye. They can cure and they can kill through seeing, and such seeing, so I am told, in many parts of South America, is a bodily substance – like the down of newborn birds in Tierra del Fuego – that fills the body of the shaman. Seeing is a substance and such seeing changes fate. Seeing is the feathers of newborn birds. What does “is” mean here?

Note that conjuring is not distinct from these supernatural acts but is the same thing. The trick turns out to be more than a deceit. More like a mimesis imitating natural forces, a play for the spirits. We saw that with the winch on the Death Ship.

Conjuring questions being. The nature of being is suspended. It is not clear what is object, what is a subject.

With its love of rapid disappearances and appearances out of nowhere, with its turning of insides into outsides and vice versa, shamanic conjuring helps us understand a little better how this theater of being presents being as the transformation of being into the beingness of transforming forms. That is animism. Anything but constant.

Stories and films can do this too, as with a blue feather, a stoker on a death ship, and men ready to take on any risk for money as in *The Wages of Fear*. Things come alive in a continuous, if staggered, series of transformations, as happens of course with work, and with the coordination of hand, soul, and eye. Benjamin wrote that this coordination was the essence of craft, including the craft of making a story – as I have tried to do here.

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1
Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 107--08.

2
B. Traven, *The Death Ship* (1934; repr. Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991), 79.

3
Ibid., 106.

4
Ibid., 107.

5
Ibid., 112.

6
Ibid., 172-73.

7
Ibid., 173.

8
Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 106.

9
Traven, *The Death Ship*, 131.

10
Marx and Engels fought bitterly with the anarchists under Bakunin and preferred to destroy the First International (1864--1876) rather than let the anarchists take over. Engels famously asked something to the effect of, "How can you have a ship without a captain?" or "When there's a storm, how can the ship get through without a captain?" B. Traven supplies the answer, as did the pirates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who we read about, sailors who rebelled against their captains. What ships provide otherwise is ruthless, authoritarian discipline. Read Melville.

For all their concern with labor, neither Marx nor Engels nor Marxists in general deal with work at the intimate level of interaction with things, as we find in B. Traven, the Wobblies, Studs Terkel, or in the pages of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*. Almost by definition Marxism leapfrogs over the messy details of life and work to climb the frigid heights of so-called theory. This seduction by abstraction is built into Marxism, ever ready to succumb to what it otherwise critiques, namely not labor but labor-power, labor as a commodity embodying abstract "exchange value." Theodor Adorno was quick to point this out and evoke, in name at least, an alternative that emphasized the concrete and the particular.

On the other hand, anarchism seems to fit naturally with work as a complex, changing, concrete interaction between hand and eye. This is a result, I would hazard, of its in-built empiricism, its historical grounding in craft rather than factory, and a resolute matter-of-factness. Anarchism also displays an inordinate sensitivity to the social and collective

character of work, as expressed in Ramon Sender's novel *Seven Red Sundays*. Along with this there is an empathetic relation to the people affected by one's labor, as was so nobly expressed in the late Sixties by the Builders Labourers Movement in Sydney, which defied gentrification and inner city development that displaced the poor.

11
Traven, *The Death Ship*, 176--77.

12
Ibid., 191.

13
Ibid.

14
Ibid., 202.

15
Ibid., 265.

16
Ibid., 267.

17
Ibid., 183.

18
Ibid., 207.

19
It might seem that because the work is so inhuman, the things of the workplace become human -- or, if not human, at least animated, especially with respect to their ability to tell stories. On the *Death Ship*, beleaguered sailors speak with beleaguered machinery, slaves together on a journey to the end of time.

20
Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 102.

21
Ibid., 108-09.

08/08

e-flux journal #36 — July 2012 Michael Taussig
The Stories Things Tell And Why They Tell Them