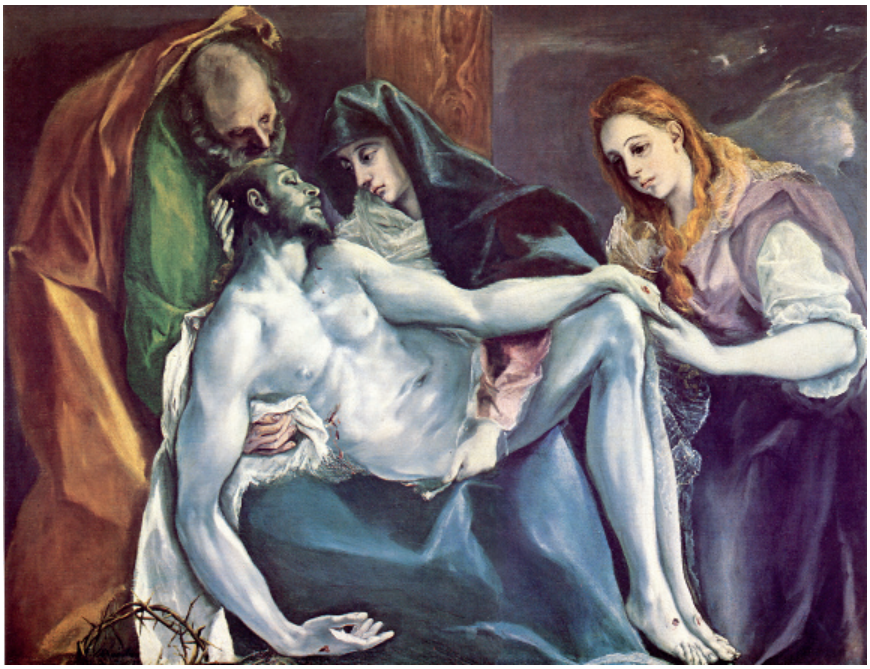


1. Réne Johnston, Press photo of Samantha Whiteside after 52 km swim across Lake Ontario, 2006
2. El Greco, *Pietà*, 1587–97, Collection of Stavros Niarchos

On the Rampancy of Christological Convergences Across the Western Pictorial Tradition

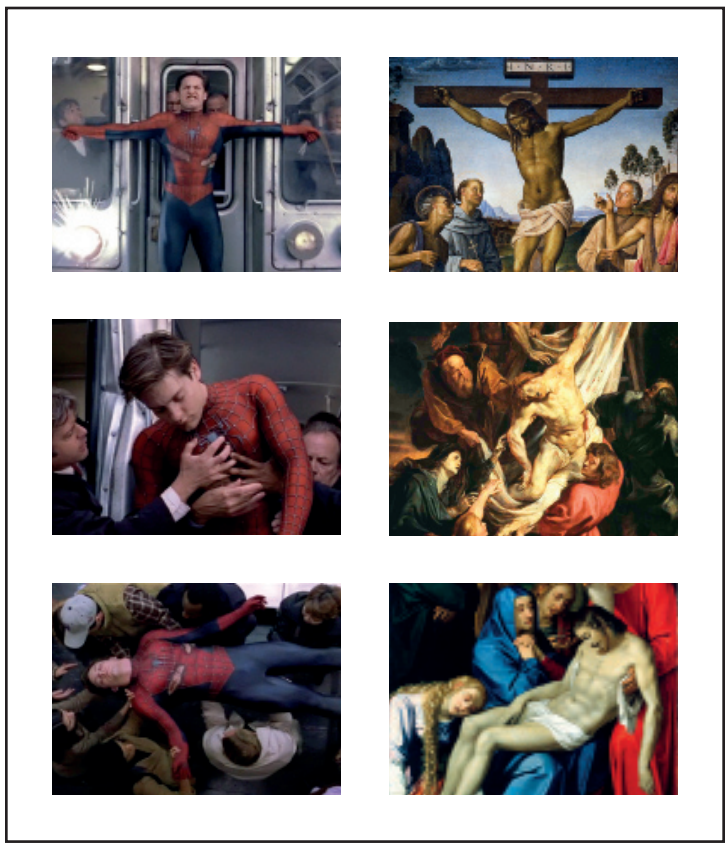
Over the past several years, I have been generating a series of convergence pieces, which is to say essays (originally published in a variety of venues, then gathered together in a 2007 book, *Everything That Rises*, published by McSweeney's, which in turn generated an online contest on the McSweeney's website in which readers were invited to contribute their own instances, which I in turn was invited to comment upon) built around the uncanny similarity of, say, one painting with another, or else a poem and a painting, a pair of magazine covers, or a news snap and a sculpture. You get the idea. Not simply instances of Separated at Birth: I mean, no one can deny that the visages of Mick Jagger and Don Knotts are spitting images of each other, but after noticing the resemblance (and then, granted, never being able to forget it), there's not terribly much you can say beyond that—unlike the case, for instance, of Newt Gingrich and Slobodan Milosevic, whose doughy high-coifed facial resemblances open out onto all sorts of other parallels with regard to opportunistic tendencies, rhetorical strategies, career trajectory, and so forth (see my essay on same, "Pillsbury Doughboy Messiahs," in the *Everything That Rises* book). There needs to be this rhyme, true, but

3. Press photo of Israeli incursion in Lebanon
4. El Greco, *Christ Holding the Cross*, 1602–07, Museo Thyssen-Bornesmisza, Madrid

that isn't enough: for such a pairing to become a convergence, one needs to be able to build a sort of prose poem around it.

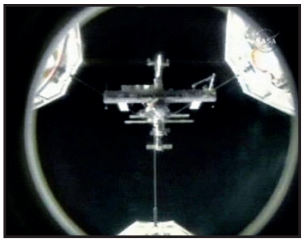
Anyway, over the past several months, with the website contest well into its second year, I've been struck by a sort of metaconvergence, or rather a pattern of patterns, an uncannily recurrent rhyme scheme percolating through much of the contest as a whole. Which is to say, the overwhelming pervasiveness of Christian imagery.

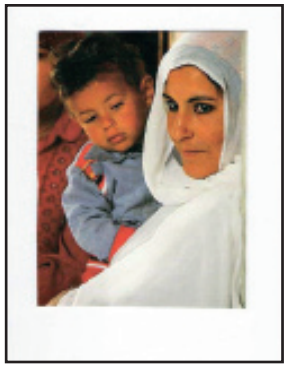
Thus, for example, Clint Roenisch of Toronto, Ontario, notices this recent news photo of an exhausted Samantha Whiteside, her swim goggles in hand, being lowered onto a stretcher moments after completing her 52 km marathon swim across Lake Ontario [fig. 1] and can't help but recall El Greco's *Pietà* (1587–97) [fig. 2]. Which in turn gets Daniel Herman to thinking about this news shot from the Israeli incursion into Lebanon [fig. 3], convinced that it too is rhyming off some El Greco, which indeed it seems to be (specifically this one, from 1602–07) [fig. 4]. Note the strange halo burst of light hovering above the Lebanese gentleman. Which in turn got Domenikos Theotokopoulos' fellow Greek, Matt Mikalatos, to offer up The Passion of Peter Parker [fig. 5].



5. The Passion of Peter Parker, stills from *Spiderman*, 2002, with Renaissance Passion paintings

On another occasion, Jonathan Shipley couldn't help but notice, in this image of Skylab floating in space [fig. 6], shades of Dalí's vision [fig. 7]. (In this context, it's interesting to think about the cross, with its perpendicular axis representing the vertical slicing of the transcendental into the horizontal sway of the everyday—the divine, in other words, into the human—as also providing the template for the subsequent x-y axis of Cartesian mathematics, the sort of mathematics that in turn made the whole space program possible. And to wonder, in turn, whether that sort of mathematics could only have occurred to a secularizing Christian like Descartes.)





Margit Christ(!)ensen noted the convergence above between two postcards she came upon the gift shop the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, a church dedicated to the eternal sleep of the Blessed Virgin, one portraying a Muslim mother and child [fig. 8], the other the Virgin of Vladimir [fig. 9], an oft-emulated Russian icon.

6. View of Skylab from space 7. Salvador Dalí, *Christ of St. John of the Cross*, 1951, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum 8. Postcard of a Muslim mother and child 9. Postcard of the Virgin of Vladimir, twelfth century

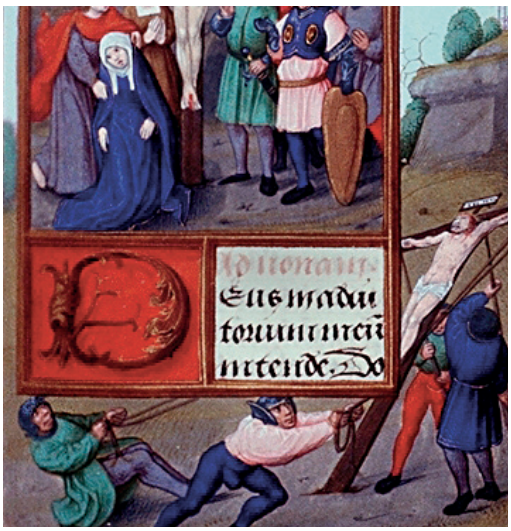
When Charlie Hopper submitted this snapshot of his uncles, who were World War II veterans, joined by his boom-baby cousin installing a clothesline at his grandma's house sometime in the '50s or early '60s [fig. 10], he of course couldn't help but think of Joe Rosenthal's iconic image of the flag-raising over Iwo Jima [fig. 11]. But that in turn got me to thinking. For a question arises as to why that specific image, of all the hundreds of thousands shot during the war, proved so uniquely resonant for those millions who immediately prized it back home at the time and for so many of the generations thereafter. And here I think our friend Mr. Hopper, or maybe his uncles, are onto something.

For the entire island-hopping campaign that came to characterize the Pacific War must have come to seem, both to those back home and to the thousands of ravaged, bone-weary Marines who actually undertook it, like so many Stations of the Cross, and that terrible mountain like some species of Calvary.

Whether or not that specific association was in the minds of the five Marines who posed for Rosenthal's photo, or even in Rosenthal's own mind as he shaped and snapped it, I can't help but suspect it was at the back of the minds of the photo editors back home who, all around the country, were drawn to that specific image (out of all the others that were also sent back from that roll) and featured it on their front pages the next day.

For, of course, that pose has a history, from early medieval manuscripts [fig. 12], through sixteenth century paintings [fig. 13], Rembrandt [fig. 14], and Rubens [fig. 15].

10. Uncles raising a clothesline, circa 1955–60
11. Joe Rosenthal, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, 1945

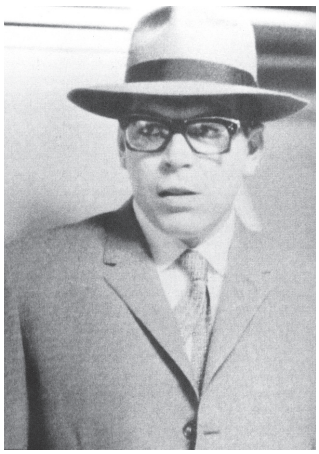


12. *The Raising of the Cross*, early medieval 13. *The Elevation of the Cross*, circa 1500 14. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Raising of the Cross*, circa 1633 15. Pieter Paul Rubens, *The Raising of the Cross* (central panel), 1610–11

16. Freddy Alborta, The display of Ernesto "Che" Guevara's corpse, following his execution, 1967
17. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, Mauritshuis, The Hague

That's the way images work (this has been one of the main themes of this whole convergence exercise): images prepare a seedbed for other images, a context for receptivity. What we see is rooted in what we have already seen. That was the foundation of John Berger's marvelous insight, years ago, to the effect that the image which Che Guevara's Bolivian captors must have had subliminally in mind, as if hardwired into their minds, the image that taught the strutting generals where to stand in relation to their quarry and the photographer, Freddy Alborta, how to frame his shot [fig. 16], must surely have been this image [fig. 17] Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). But no less surely, the image that Rembrandt must have had in mind (or anyway an image quite like it), was this:

Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* [fig. 18]. Note the similarity of the faces of the corpses in both images (for that matter in all three images). Which is one of the reasons (another being the way that the trio of central onlookers are portrayed as gazing, dumbfounded, not at the corpse's splayed arm but rather at the professor's upraised hand, as he explains the sorts of gestures those muscles nothing short of miraculously make possible) why Rembrandt's painting ends up being so much about life rather than death. And which in turn is one of the reasons that Che in death (by way of Alborta by way of Rembrandt by way of Mantegna) ends up becoming transfigured into the iconic t-shirt figure we know today. Had Che, for example, happened to have been clean-shaven on the day he died, had he, for example, looked like this guy [fig. 19], none of that transmutive charge would have pertained, and there would have been no Che logo t-shirts. (That guy, incidentally, is Che Guevara, disguised as an Argentinean businessman in the photo of the passport he wielded on his clandestine trip to Africa, a few years earlier, in 1965).



18. Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, circa 1480, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan
19. Passport photo of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, 1965

Artists are doing this sort of thing all the time (and were doing so, I assure you, long before the contest). Thus Goya's *The Third of May 1808* [fig. 20], with that white-shirted central figure, his arms cast wide in a conspicuous allusion to the Crucifixion (and implicitly, to the Resurrection and the Life), and Manet, in turn, riffing off Goya a half-century later (granted, with the nationalities of the protagonists reversed) in his *The Execution of Maximilian* of 1868-69, the emperor christlike in his sombrero-halo, flanked in death (again like Christ) by two confederates [fig. 21].

And Picasso, in turn, riffing off Goya and Manet for his *Massacre in Korea* of 1951 [fig. 22]. Though leave it to contest entrant Michele Siegal to have recognized the rhyme off Goya and Manet in Oded Balilty's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a lone Jewish matron shoving back Israeli soldiers as they endeavor to remove her from her illegal settlement on the West Bank (right down to the onlooking crowd, out of Manet) [fig. 23].

20. Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814, Museo del Prado, Madrid
21. Édouard Manet, *The Execution of Maximilian*, 1868–69, Kunsthalle Mannheim

22. Pablo Picasso, *Massacre in Korea*, 1951, Musée National Picasso, Paris
23. Oded Balilty, AMONA, West Bank/Feb. 2006 (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)

Or to take just one further example, Duchamp. Yes! Even Duchamp: specifically, his notoriously inspired *Fountain* of 1917, the ready-made sculpture the ur-Dadaist attempted to enter, pseudonymously (under the name R. Mutt), into that spring's follow-on exhibition to the Armory Show of a few years earlier, where his *Nude Descending a Staircase* had caused such a howling critical ruckus ("an explosion in a shingles factory"). This time, though, the show's scandalized organizers didn't even let the piece—after all, simply a urinal set on its side—into the exhibition.

Simply a urinal set on its side, yes, and yet much, much more. "A lovely form has been revealed, freed from its functional purposes," Duchamp's sidekick and collector Walter Arensberg insisted, appealing the board's decision, "—therefore a man has clearly made an aesthetic contribution." (An estimation resoundingly reaffirmed, almost a century later, when, in a poll as part of the run-up to the 2004 Turner Prize, over 500 international art experts voted it "the most influential modern art work of all time.") Arensberg's protest was to no avail, however. So he and Duchamp lugged the forlorn thing over to Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery (as Rachel Cohen relates in the sixteenth chapter of her luminous *A Chance Meeting* braid of interweaving essays), where Stieglitz in turn photographed it in a glow of profound reverence [fig. 24]. Carl Van Vechten subsequently enthused to Gertrude Stein, by letter, that "the photographs make it look like anything from a Madonna to a Buddha."

Or, as I myself always thought, and, interestingly, found myself thinking all over again just recently, a pietà [fig. 25].

Early last year, a 77-year-old "art activist pensioner" named Pierre Pinoncelli, from Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (site, as it happens, of Van Gogh's famous asylum), attacked Duchamp's icon with a hammer, slightly chipping it, as it lay in state as the centerpiece to the Centre Pompidou's massive Dada retrospective. Many shocked newspaper readers the next morning (I am sure, at any rate, that I was not alone) were put in mind of that infamous moment, back in May 1972, when a 33-year-old Hungarian-born Australian geologist named Laszlo Toth, ecstatically keening "I am Jesus Christ!," took a hammer to Michelangelo's sublime *Pietà* in the Vatican, causing considerably more damage. While Toth was almost universally decried as a cultural terrorist, a small band of radicals hailed his "gentle hammer" under the distinctly more Dadaist slogan, "No more masterpieces!" Toth was eventually committed to an Italian asylum and then expelled from the country, and even though the sculpture was presently repaired, the attack left quite an impression. (A few months later, *National Lampoon* ran a photo of the attack itself, Toth's hammer-wielding arm raised in ecstasy, under the memorable caption, "Oh my God, Pietà? I thought it said Piñata!" And some years after that, perhaps similarly liberated—or, alternatively, deranged—by the incident and its Duchampian precursor, Andres Serrano perpetrated his own *Piss Christ*.)

As it turned out, this most recent was not Pinoncelli's first attack on Duchamp's masterpiece. Back in 1993, in what to my own mind may count as the single most inspired feat of performance art of all time, Pinoncelli urinated into the sculpture as it lay on display in Nîmes, France. At the time, he defended his action, explaining how he'd simply been trying to "give dignity back to the object, a victim of distortion of its use, even its personality." This time around, he amplified that exegesis by explaining to reporters how, "having been transformed back into a simple object for pissing into after having been the most famous object in the history of art, its existence was broken, it was going to have a miserable existence."

"Better to put an end to it with a few blows of the hammer," he went on modestly, esteeming his own gesture "not at all the act of a vandal, more a charitable act."

Ah, the Resurrection and the Life of Art!

Now, friends of mine who've been following this whole convergence passion of mine, and especially my responses to some of these recent contest entries, have taken to asking what a good little Jewish boy like me is doing getting so caught up in Christian iconography. I suppose I could answer, glibly, by sputtering, along the lines of that classic old joke, "Hey, you're the ones showing me all these dirty pictures!" But that would merely be begging the question. Or, rather, the question might be better answered with a counterquestion: how can anyone who chooses to engage the Western pictorial tradition help but quickly become entrammeled in Christian

24. Alfred Stieglitz, *Photograph of Marcel Duchamp's Fountain*, 1917
25. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *La Pietà*, 1499, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican State

iconography, both overt and (more recently) sublimated, sometimes even unconsciously, into more secularized renditions?

Which in turn opens out onto a more intriguing line of speculation. For back in the first few centuries of the modern epoch (the late Hellenistic/early Roman era, once characterized by T. S. Eliot for its "too rapid and great expansion and mixture of races canceling each other's beliefs"—especially there in Palestine, at the very nexus of three continents—a period supersaturated with a surfeit of stray transcendences, when somebody—I forget, was it Petronius?—noted that, and I am paraphrasing, "Nowadays, walking about, one is as like to come upon a god as another person"), what was it about Christianity that so fitted it (and it alone, among all those other proliferating cults and heresies) for eventual success and triumph? Wasn't it after all something about its story, its narrative, the overwhelming richness of that narrative and the way it so readily leant itself to illustration (especially across the many ensuing centuries, in which most people couldn't read)?

You don't have to be a Carl Jung or a Joseph Campbell to notice that the Jesus story manages to swallow up virtually all the great themes of human life (or, anyway, of human storytelling)—birth and death, poverty and wealth, virgins and whores, mothers and sons, fathers and sons, solitude and bustle, hope and despair, loyalty and betrayal, wakefulness and sleep, sin and sacrifice, great faith and great doubt, suffering and redemption, grief and rapture—and, for that matter, more specifically, many of the foremost motifs of classical Greek and Roman mythology: the virgin impregnated by a god who then gives birth to a hero, half man and half god, who in turn gets tested by a harrowing season in the wilderness and eventually, in dying, finds himself utterly transubstantiated. And what a death! Near naked like that, stretched supine, an object of pity and sorrow and horror and awe, but one through whose subsequent representations entire traditions of classical rendering of the Olympian gods were going to be funneled.

It is as if, in the vastness of time, that specific story (more so than any of the others circulating across those years) had been virtually precision engineered, lens-like, to gather in all the great themes from the ages that had preceded it, to concentrate and infuse those motifs with yet greater urgency and significance, and then, hourglass-like, spray them out on the far side into all the ages that were to follow. (And please: I'm not saying that it was thus engineered, I'm saying it is as if it were, and that it couldn't have been more expertly suited toward its eventual triumphant purpose if it had been.)

Such that you can walk through the medieval sections of any of the world's great museums, and all you will see are images of Christ's story (along with those of his subsequent martyred saints)—it can even get a bit trying; "Enough already!" you may find yourself exasperating—and yet you may in turn also notice that, even self-limited, the artists were able

to portray virtually all of life's enduring themes. Sometimes you will even catch them casting such motifs in contemporary dress—Jesus, say, as a Flemish burgher, Peter as a Venetian fisherman. (And this might not even have been a case of affect or artifice: how would anyone in those days have been given to realize that people didn't always dress the way they do at present?) Annunciation (which is to say, receiving surprising news), birth, nursing and showing off a baby, the baby growing to young manhood, walking about, speaking in parables (the parables themselves), engaging the world, confronting his elders, being betrayed, tormented and humiliated, paraded about, tortured and killed, his corpse brought down and spread out and cleansed, surrounded by mourners, and finally, on the far side, lifted up to majesty and regal splendor. What of contemporary reality, back in that age of abiding belief, couldn't have been subsumed and represented through such a tale?

True, this tale monopolized virtually all Western representation for centuries upon centuries, but it also allowed for the visualization of virtually all of Western life throughout those centuries. And then, when belief started falling away, the tropes through which those life stages had been visualized persisted in secularized form: that (and that virtually alone) being what surprise, admiration, or betrayal quite simply had come to look like.

And continues to look like to this day.

Which, in turn, brings me back to that first image, the girl on the far side of her epic swim, and its paired El Greco:

Uncannily similar. Though, one finds oneself thinking, at least Christ never had to deal with those craning paparazzi. Though, then again, come to think of it, Christ, too, over time came to suffer his own throng of jostling flashbulb rubberneckers. Such, at any rate, is another way of thinking

about the hundreds of painters and sculptors who took up the subject of his Deposition from the Cross—the Old Masters reconceived, in this sense, as Paparazzi of the Passion: [fig. 26–32]

(For that matter, flipping the polarities of our analogy, contemporary paparazzi, all agog over this Paris or that Diana, this Brad or the other Jen, this Madonna—for God's sake! this Madonna—might well themselves be thought of as latter-day versions of their Old Master predecessors, likewise in thrall to the transcendental incarnate. Star power, indeed.)

Flash! Pop! Snap!

26. Giotto di Bondone, *Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ)*, 1304–1306, Capella degli Scrovegni, Padua, Italy
27. Antonio Ciseri, *The Deposition of Christ*, circa 1883, Santuario della Madonna del Sasso, Orselina, Italy
28. Rosso Fiorentino, *Deposition*, 1521, Pinacoteca Comunale di Volterra, Italy
29. Angolo Bronzino, *The Deposition of Christ*, 1542–45, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon, France
30. Filippino Lippi and Pietro Perugino, *The Deposition*, circa 1506, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Florence
31. Master of the Saint Bartholomew Altarpiece, *The Deposition*, circa 1500–05, The National Gallery, London
32. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Entombment of Christ*, circa 1602–03, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican