

Do You Feel Me Now?

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There is a kind of moral imperative which drives the discussion of specular regimes towards triangular configurations so that the scene of vision is always also observed. The third eye is an allegory of theorization; the perspective of theory being identified, even surreptitiously, with the gaze, that other of subjectivity which authorizes and unauthorizes identifications or prosecutes the venality and licentiousness of the subject's eye. This third eye is a doubling of the subject's own vision, which in turn depends on the presence of another eye, that of the object. For if the object is not human, does not possess an eye, then the moral turpitude of the subject is not assured and guilt cannot be assigned or assumed. In other words, there is no role for theory.

The theorizing of vision is in this way tied to a vision of the social which is social vision: essentially a panoptic regime where the internalization of the gaze is normatively expressed as discourse. Vision is always already disciplined vision, a seeing that is seen and judged by the omnipresent unlocatable camera of social approbation, whose position theory unceremoniously appropriates to itself. The social is a chain of seeing: all seers are seen in an infinite regress, and seeing never does arrest the progress of scopical transitivity. Seeing, like discourse, proliferates. Vision is a cancerous tumor whose metastasis constitutes the social. And theory is the hypocrite physician whose occupation is parasitic not to health, but rather pathology.

Theory oversees the disintegration of the self into constituent faculties each figured picturesquely as discrete beings and narrativised in the scene of vision. The body seen. The eye seeing. The mind judging. These are the three eyes of theory's scene of vision—a metaphysical triumvirate: ontology, epistemology, and consciousness. Paradoxically, the constitution of selfhood through the imagined coincidence of these elements seems to require their alienation and personification on theory's stage.

To create this scene, three identical actors are made to play distinct roles whose casting is guaranteed by their position in relation to seeing. The object can see but does not. The subject sees and is seen. The observer only sees. The actors are not constitutionally distinct; just their access to vision serves to differentiate them. Only the middle character approaches a sense of humanness since the demands of theatricality have hidden facets of the other two. They are all the same, yet they appear to be different. They can *appear* to be different because they remain confined to the visual register where the play of appearance and disappearance—the seen and the unseen—act as surrogates for presence and absence. This is the same stage on which the drama of fetishistic substitutions can succeed: both difference *and* likeness can be hidden from view, and the mere gesture of hiding effects a "realization" of presence or absence (*fort/da*). The visual register is thus dominated by a logic of the same which results in a multiplicative proliferation: what is already there is repeated.

The above indictment of vision and its theory rehearses many of the complaints Stephen Melville lays out in his "Division of the Gaze, or, Remarks on the Color and Tenor of Contemporary 'Theory'" in which he characterizes theory's late visual turn. We take for granted that the immense and diverse discursive body we now cavalierly refer to as "theory" is unanimous in its suspicion of the "apparent transparency and naturalness of vision." Melville

stops to ask—or asks in the midst of *his* theorizing: What is this theory doing as it theorizes vision? From Jameson, he finds an answer, to wit, "The visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object" (qtd. in Melville 103). So theory's business is the betrayal of vision; vision is always already a treacherous business—not naturally so, but necessarily so. Since there can be no access to a vision prior to its construction in language, or at least in the social in some way, it is constructed in the province of deceit, implicitly under the sway of ideology.

The implicatedness of theory in vision is presented in relation to the similarities between Sartre's and Lacan's narrativized accounts of vision. It is the homology of these which is referenced above: a seer is seen. The realization of a viewing subject that he/she too is the object of a gaze produces a kind of rupture. Ironically, the same rupture which is at one moment carceral and disciplinary, subjecting the eye to social judgment, is at another, in the guise of theory, somehow libratory. Melville points directly to this contradiction; "'Theory' and the means and objects of its critiques," he writes, "become oddly conflated here—as if the prisoner were to imagine he would be free if only he could watch himself more closely than even the jailer can ... " And our fascination with the image in the mirror he terms "the pornography of the theoretical gaze" (Melville 111).

Melville searches for a possible alternative view in the writings of Merleau-Ponty and in an anti-Sartrean reading of Lacan. Specifically, it is the introduction of a strategy consisting of enigma, contact and empathy, which promises to supply a corrective substitute for the distancing structures of vision common to that opposing strain of theory. Playing down differences between Lacan, whose scheme is fully social, and Merleau-Ponty, whose scheme is essentially asocial,

Melville describes the main characteristics of this chiasmic nexus in the latter's terms: it takes visibility to be enigmatic and assigns theory's task as "staying within its duplicity" rather than "getting behind it." He quotes Merleau-Ponty who sums up this situation most poetically, "Vision is the place where our continuity with the world conceals itself, the place where we mistake our contact for distance, imagining that seeing is a substitute for, rather than a mode of, touching" (qtd. in Melville 109). The haptic element in his description is not just a way of re-modeling sight but of asserting that the presumption of distance within the mechanisms of vision is complicated by the subjects proximity and coherence within the world of things. In vision there is a production of distance out of contiguity, but the body remains part of the world the subject views, it remains in contact with it. And further, vision is as much a matter of that contact as it is a matter of the production of distance. The Chiasmus is the weaving together of distance with proximity where the possibility of vision arises.

Kaja Silverman's meditation on the corporeality of the ego (in "The Bodily Ego" Chapter of her book *The Threshold of the Visible World*) covers an analogous territory in that she re-reads Lacan's Mirror Stage as the alignment of the Imago and the body, that is as an alliance of two distinct mental projections of selfhood rather than one disjunctive effect of a visual identification with a mirror image. This opens the possibility that the ego is not simply, or only, an image, and thus it is not necessarily dependent on a visual effect or destined to be described within a play of incessantly visual metaphor.

Touch is clearly the other of vision. It is always either what vision is or what vision is not; what vision succeeds or what vision substitutes for; what vision supplements or what is added to vision as a supplement. Touch implies visions blindness. Touch returns as the repressed of vision. Touch is the symptom of visions fear (of castration), a fear that in its triumph, in its

ascendance, vision may have lost something, something it must feel around for, must fumble for in the dark. Touch is vision's consolation: for every day has its night, every look its singular direction, its horizon, its blind spot, its limit. I turn away, but you are still there; I *feel* your presence. Looking forward, my enemy creeps up from behind; I reach for my weapon ...

The seed of Silverman's recuperation of a haptic ego is in Freud's *the Ego and the Id*, where the ego is, "first and foremost, a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface" (qtd. in Silverman 9). While it seems that Lacan's interpretation of this ego is that it is a *visual* projection of a (bodily) surface on a (cerebral) surface by a (specular) surface, Silverman reads a footnote to Freud's text as an indication that this "projection" need not refer to a visual image. "The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body..." (qtd. in Silverman 12). So the thing which the mind forms as a "projection" is a *sense* of the surface of the body. The body produces sensations in its encounter with the world: when it touches it.

Somehow touch becomes translated into a sense of boundary, of encounter between that which belongs to me and that which does not, even though the cutaneous sensations are indistinct, and unstable (expansive and contractive), difficult to localize, and continuous with the important sensations of the orifices which are somewhat ambiguously being both on and beyond the surface of the body. Silverman relies on the work of Leplanche, Schilder, and Wallon to elaborate the mechanisms of a translation from these vague sensations to a bodily ego. An awareness of the cutaneous surface requires the encounter with an objective world in order to even activate the sensations. This encounter need not be social; however, at the level of the social, it is the touch of other bodies that map sensation and inscribe their desire onto the body.

In this way, a sense of self emerges in the sensations produced from the encounter with the other at the surface of the body (Silverman 12-14).

Wallon's account of the mirror stage assumes a disjunctive relationship between what he calls the "exteroceptive ego" and "proprioceptive ego," which, on occasion(s), form a tentative unity. The former term refers to the visual imago which remains stubbornly external, while the latter term refers to a complex of sensations that include the cutaneous as well as a range of other bodily sensations—muscular, etc.—that together give a sense of that which is "here" and "mine." It is only in relation to this sense of inside, that the imago can even be understood as outside. The difficult integration of these two conceptual realms is what produces the sense of self. The mirror image provides the opportunity for what Silverman calls "Identity-at-a-distance" and by which she means an identification that insists in its otherness, as an orientation *to* an other. Lacan's account is both inadequate and suggestive in that it elides the difference between the child's physical body and the image of that body. The misrecognition of the mirror image as self is significant because it depends on the integration of the exteroceptive and proprioceptive egos (Silverman 14-17).

In theorizing the ego as an unstable coincidence of the these two fractional sensoriums, Silverman allows for a multiplicity of potentially mobile ego identifications and dissidentifications. Within a social scene, specific possible images are presented to or superimposed on a subject, and ratified in a way that is modeled on the authorizing presence of the parent at the scene of the mirror stage. But these images are not necessarily accepted and their integration is not necessarily the occasion for joy. There are two other interesting possibilities that arise from this unstable disjunctive ego: that the ego tends to fall apart—that an

insistence on its coherence may even be an unnecessary and ideological formation; and, that images of things might be integrated in a similar way to images of bodies.

Wallon formulates an idea of "appartenance," defined as "the extension of our feeling of material or bodily existence to objects" (qtd. in Silverman 18). Silverman only mentions this idea as evidence in regard to her assertion that non-pathological adult subjectivities still participate in the disjunctive experience of identity-at-a-distance. The transformation that occurs at the mirror stage is not a singular punctual event, but one that recurs, so that the labors of ego alignment are continuous and still characteristic of adult subjects. The promiscuity of a ego identifications and the possibility of appartenance are potentially significant in the experience of art. Seeing objects becomes a bodily experience with implications that reach into the dynamics of ego formations with the possibility of disrupting their unstable alignments. This suggests a kind of deep, bodily empathy with perceived objects.

The idea of empathetic reception on a bodily level has precedents in the theorization of music and dance where a concept of "vicarious performance" or "kinesthetic empathy" refers to a sympathetic experience of gestures of performance in the bodies of the members of the audience. This is the theory of 'air guitar' (Bahn 46). It is not necessary to mimic the gestures, however, in order to experience them. In listening to music, the audience is not passive; it plays along as if it is performing. If we can imagine that reading is a kind of writing, it should be equally possible to imagine listening as a kind of playing, watching as dancing, seeing as painting. These are not necessarily identifications within a motivational world of authorship. That kind of identification with another subjectivity would not be as differentiated from ego-forming misrecognitions. The stranger phenomenon is an alignment with elements of the object world as things. This means a

direct relationship to the body of the other as thing—as thing to thing, or a relationship directly to an object qua object—such as a painted shape which my body might in some way become.

The painting for Merleau-Ponty is important because it demonstrates the continuity of seeing and touching. For Lacan, painting is in competition with a philosophical platonic ideality because it announces from within the realm of appearance, that it is what gives appearance—and not the idea (Melville 109). Lacan, and Merleau-Ponty's insist that there is something which vision both overlooks and depends on—which is to say that the seer is part of the object world and his/her contiguity with it provides the possibility of seeing, touching becoming the sign of that enigmatic repression. There is some distance between that notion and the conception of a kinesthetic empathy, or a bodily sight that occurs somehow along side of, or instead of, a vision which is always subordinated to a cognitive engagement. There is a temptation to conceive of a bodily sight as something that escapes from social construction, but that would be a mistake. If consciousness is not unitary, the bodily ego is still arguably as constructed as its image-based other. The reasons for the strange and impactful effects of a kinesthetic empathy might be sought in the eruption of affect that seems to be concomitant with alignments of the ego.

The reception of Bridget Riley's paintings in the 60s serve as an example for thinking about how a notion like kinesthetic empathy might be used to explain a viewers relationship to painting. Riley's introduction to the U.S. came with the 1965 exhibition "The Responsive Eye" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The show was a popular success, and the Op sensibility soon made its way into fashion and design. At the same time, Ops detractors were focused on its physical effects. True, Op produced a fascination, but this kinesthetic identification was accompanied by destabilizing effects: vertigo, nausea, headaches, repulsion, even fainting. Its powerful synesthetics seemed to produce a bodily powerlessness and a psychic

anxiety. The combining of the senses in Op was a source of suspicion for critics who had comfortably arrived at a consensus regarding a periodization of their separation. Rosalind Krauss's attack on the *The Responsive Eye* show faults Op's tactile sensibilities, and defends a "genuine optical painting" against its regressive illusionism. Op is duplicitous; it tricks the eye in order to produce physical sensations (Lee 26).

Krauss's critique of Op is based on the accusation that the works rely on an illusionism—that they violate a principle of truth to materials by suggesting the appearance of what isn't actually there. But if duplicity is always a part of vision itself, how can Riley's painting be faulted for partaking of it? On the other hand, it can be argued that what the paintings do is either produce effects that can be traced to the physical apparatus of seeing itself, or that they expose the interestedness of the cognitive mechanisms, which are troubled by the ambiguities of images that don't easily conform to conventions of representation – even those which have been created around "non-representational" painting.

Riley's paintings are constructed around ideas of systematic change across the space of the work. They rely on periodic structures: geometric figures combined in patterns of repetition and difference. While Riley's techniques were formalistic, her titles hinted at effect and affect, the physical and the visceral: *Climax*, *Shift*, *Shiver*, *Arrest*. In this way, the work acknowledges a line of transmission between the formal properties of its geometries and a corporal impact. It is possible to apprehend the systematicity of the work in a visual register where a reconstruction of its rules produces a platform for the staging of a comparison between those rules and optical effects considered as illusion. So for example, in viewing a 1964 dot painting, like *Loss*, *Pause*, or *Where*, as dots approach a limit line not figured in the painting, they gradually contract along an the axis parallel to the limit. The color of the dot varies according to its proximity to one or

more curved and also unfigured horizons of color variation. The visual effect is reminiscent of perspective and likely depends on our familiarity with perspectival distortions of scale and the atmospheric techniques of landscape painting. But in addition there is an vertiginous pull of our bodies towards the invisible horizons that order the painting's mutating elements. Triangle paintings like *Shift*, or *Shiver*, both from 1963, achieve their effects by gradual changes of the location of one point of a triangle within a strict grid of repetition. Here, there is no question of illusionistic effects, but the eye has difficulty navigating the image, and the production of an abstract model of its system is not necessarily a satisfying response to its puzzle in and of itself.

The paintings draw the viewer into them; they tempt the body into a rehearsal of their gestures. To appreciate one of these painting requires a giving over of one's body to it, a surrender that is an uncomfortable contrast with the attitude of mastery that accrues to the knowing subject in relation to a painting which provides simply an object example for theoretical abstraction. The disciplinary overseer is theory's usual place in relation to the object; the object is subordinated to theory, and to its gaze.

Op operationalizes the strange prospect of the object looking back, of making an object of the viewer. To risk being object to another object is to risk being object to another subject. Imagine the humiliation of some gallery goers gaze as you bend and sway under the influence of the hypnotic pull of invisible lines of force in one of Riley's paintings. You are caught doing air guitar in a temple of high culture, becoming slave where you should have become master. The response is appropriate though, and to forgo it is to dismiss a range of intense pleasures that can be had through the cultivation of passivity. The attitude should not be unfamiliar since it is part of our to our relation to music and dance and maybe even pornography. Furthermore, it is

suggestive in regard to the reception of new media formations like games, interactive work, and generative algorithmic abstractions.

The value of an appartenantive strategy is not simply in becoming passive, as passivity would hardly be a useful attitude in every situation. Rather, it suggests a path away from an insistently integrative ego that is incapable of an empathetic attitude towards the other constructed within an unbridgeable difference. As Silverman describes it, "The 'coherent' ego ... maintains itself by repudiating whatever it cannot swallow," that is it incorporates images of sameness and meets difference with either horror, pity or contempt (Silverman 24). Heteropathic identifications with unidealized images of the other interrupts the stubborn refusal of difference. While those with normative ego formations, who have access to an idealizing imago, might resist appartenantive strategies of reception and cling to particular ego alignments, these alignments are mutable and their shifts are not pathological. as our experience of a variety of art forms clearly demonstrates.

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