

The Perception of Non-Perception: Lessons for Art Education with Downcast Eyes (Part One: *Trompe-L'Oeil* and the Question of Radical Evil)

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Pretext

The Roman historian Pliny recounts a story that occurred during Periclean Athens. I will utilize this story, as a trope to undertake an interrogation of perception as it is commonly understood and currently practiced by art educators in schools. In order to deconstruct vision/blindness, or the perception/non-perception binary, I have examined the psychoanalytic paradigm of Jacques Lacan. His current interpreters provided the conceptual tools for such an undertaking. Given that the question of representation has become a key sign-post of postmodernism, art educators must conceptualize a trajectory for itself in the 21st century.

Part One of such a trajectory questions the very foundations of the Western Eye. Its heyday of Cartesian perspectivism has now evolved into the postmodern *simulacrum* which purports to represent the phantasmagoric spectacle, that Jean Baudrillard called the “hyperreal”

world of simulations where the sign of the image refers only to itself in a system of differences. Perception has been metaphorically characterized as a “corridor of mirrors,” a *mise en abyme* effect of endless reflection (Carroll, 1987). The claims to a multi-dimensional and multi-perspectival knowledge of all phenomenon paradoxically strengthens the status of an enucleated eye despite the waning of a transcendental gaze. In *Part One*, I question the validity of the enucleated eye by raising the “spectre” of desire which can’t be “seen.” I suggest that this “other” of vision is introduced into the field of vision by the function of the gaze as Lacan developed it in his *XI Seminar* (1979). He argued that the field of vision is essentially organized around what cannot be seen and what appears as a “screen” or a “stain,” a “spot.” Given such a stance, vision in the postmodern age now becomes complicated by an ethics of blindness (cf. Emmanuel Levinas) and sublimity (cf. Jean-François Lyotard). I will explore the implications of this “blind spot” for art education by introducing the question of “radical or diabolical evil;” i.e., the possibility that the human will is capable not simply of opposing the moral law, but making this opposition the *very motive* of human action. Such a possibility, for example, is paradigmatically illustrated by Oliver Stone’s film *Natural Born Killers* which specularizes its excesses (Hamsher, Murphy, Townstead, & Stone, 1994). Given the prevalence of this “dark God,” what are art educators to make of postmodern evil? *Part One* responds to this question through “five lessons” that are meant to lay the ground work for further analysis (i.e., a sequel—*Part Two*) which will extend this conversation to the simulacra world of electronic technology and the digitalized image in a more direct manner.¹

Lesson One: Perception as (Mis)perception and Deception

There is a famous story told by Pliny about the quest of the

¹This short essay is the beginning of a larger project which explores the question of art, art education and ethics from a decidedly Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view begun some ten years ago (see jagodzinski, 1996). *Part 2*, which deals with the question of the deep structures of perception and simulacra of digitalized images has been developed for “Untold Stories about Perception” an art education symposium honoring the work of Ron N. MacGregor. The notion of “downcast eyes” in the title comes from Jay (1993).

artist to represent reality. One day Zeuxis and Parrhasius had a painting contest to determine who could best paint nature in all its verisimilitude. Zeuxis painted grapes which were so lifelike that birds came and began to peck at them. Overjoyed, he thought that he had won the "mimetic" prize. Parrhasius, on the other hand, had painted a picture of a curtain. When Zeuxis came over to see what Parrhasius had done, he requested that the curtain be drawn back and the picture displayed. When he realized that he been fooled he gestured in defeat. Whereas he had managed to deceive only birds, Parrhasius had deceived an artist.

This story holds a special place in the development of Western art concerning the question of mimesis, or "realism." The capturing of an exact *mirror* likeness of Nature remains a strong impulse for school-age artists and for the "lay" public in general. Adolescents, who their peers identify as "class artists," are often judged by their skillful ability to render reality "naturalistically." Professional artists, especially illustrators, are legitimated by their ability to draw "realistically." Unquestionably, art education has sought to teach such drawing skills. Kimon Nicolaïdes (1941), whom Betty Edwards (1979) studied, provided sure ways to draw "naturally." Some art educators feel that constant practice is all that is necessary. Peter London (1989), for instance, wrote, "Do you want to draw like Rembrandt or Degas? Simple! Just draw ten hours a day, six days a week, for forty years" (p. 16).

If art is to be "accessible" and not "avant-garde" it seems that there has to be some transference of feeling between the viewer and what is represented. The gestalts have to be recognizable, but not necessarily "realistic." Like the bird in Pliny's story it becomes necessary for the viewer to "peck" at the art in order to understand its meaning. The temporal gap between an image's effect on spectators and their response to it must be instantaneous. The feeling of "surprise" or "delight" that characterizes aesthetic experience is suddenly "present," and seems to emerge from "nowhere" ("know / where?"). In contrast, in a film or novel we have to wait for the unfolding of the narrative in various scenes (the moving *tableaux*) before the "surprises" begin to happen.

So the first lesson Pliny's story teaches art educators is that the connection between the image and the viewer must be, in some way, *illusionary*. The image, sculpture, film, dramatic play, and so on, must

first catch the viewer *before* he or she understands its meaning. An “arrest” of movement must occur that means that the spectator *believes* in what s/he sees. A suspension of disbelief is a necessary condition for art to take its effect on us. The spectator has to be “hailed” by the work of art; and an “interpellation” or “suture” of identity with its “world” has to transpire (see Althusser, 1971; Silverman, 1983). However, what is considered “illusionary” and “realistic” is a question of *modality* and cultural specificity. Modality, as Hodge and Tripp (1986) have concluded from studying children as they watched television, depends upon the established *cultural codes*. In the Western perspectival world children find the news more “realistic” or “real” and hence *less illusionary* than television cartoons or spectacular action pictures. The question of modality raises the question of the *psychic distance* between the viewer and the aesthetic object. For children, the news has more of a distancing effect than the spectacular effects of artistic illusion. When a culture, such as Islamic fundamentalism, remains more isolated and protective of the electronic “carpentered perspectival world” of spectacularity (see Segall *et al.*, 1966), the modality of what is considered “realistic” and “illusionary” rests more on oral/aural tradition and written orthodoxy.²

It seems that the *trompe-l'oeil* effects in Pliny’s story have a strong *tactile* sense about them, a tangibility which hints at the possibility that both blindness (invisibility) and seeing (visibility) somehow come curiously together. The temporality of sequential perception, a characteristic of the way blind people “see,”³ and space, associated with “normal” vision, collapse as modalities in the arresting moment. Feel and look, acting as one, characterize the *fascinum* (spell) as distance vanishes. Certain sculptures or paintings “invite” touching, so much so that the effect of the resultant “peck” becomes a question of transgression of *distance*. Visitors to museums and art galleries must observe “the do not touch” policy. The “peck” is considered to be pathological if a

²With the introduction of the video camera and Super 8 film the grounds of what is “realistic” and “illusionary” undergoes another shift as television series like *Top Cops* and *The Most Wanted* attempt to provide a “realistic” portrayal of crime. In this context “realism” is meant to act as a deterrent against crime (and, I would suggest, inciting paranoia) keeping “illusionary” space at a distance. This, however, is not the case with computer games where graphics “make-up” its artistic artifice. Each generation of computer graphics are said to be more “realistic” and “superior” to the ones before on the grounds that the child or adolescent can become more embodied in the illusionary world that the game provides. Children and adolescence judge their “realism” by the qualitative

spectator actually “copy-cats” in “actual” life the aggression, violence, rape, or killing seen especially on television and film where the technical proficiency of reproducing the “essential copy” of “reality” are at their height (see Bryson, 1983). Here the power of the *trompe-l’oeil* effect is said to be so powerful that the “image” (and by implication its creator) are held responsible. We need only think of Orsen Well’s 1940s radio play *The War of the Worlds* which caused a panic because of its illusionary power to create the belief that aliens have landed. In such cases art imitates life and life imitates art to the point where the boundary between them seems indistinguishable.

It is not difficult to comprehend why modernist Kantian aesthetics, which invests “aesthetic attitude” with a particular kind of distance characterized by “disinterestedness,” guards against this potential fall into “immorality.” The implications of Pliny’s story forms part of Kant’s problematic. Kant, a pious Lutheran, in his third and final critique—*The Critique of Judgement*—attempted to bridge the abyss between reason (“pure” determinate judgments of science, the realm of necessity, the “is”) and ethics (“pure” practical and indeterminate judgments of morality, the realm of freedom, the “ought”) through analogies drawn from aesthetic exemplars such as parables, allegories, and episodic narratives. Some aesthetic objects were *ob-scene*. Their *trompe-l’oeil* effects had no redeeming moral values whatsoever. Such art was simply all “artifice” and trivial entertainment. Baby boomers of the Moral Right blame television violence, punk, gangster rap and heavy metal music (played backwards for its satanic messages) for destroying the moral fiber of the youth. This familiar complaint stretches back to Plato’s injunction

amount of distance which *vanishes* when the game is being played (see also Virilio, 1991). Ultimately this leads to the “impossible” fantasy of cyberspace where the body has “figuratively” entered into the computer (e.g., as in Walt Disney’s film *Tron* was the earliest example, now we have MUDs and virtual communities). Metaphorically, the bird has not only pecked the grape, but has begun to explore all the juices it has to offer! Such a cyber fantasy has a direct bearing on the ethical question this essay is attempting to raise for art education. Part 2 develops this further. (I would like to thank Karen Keifer-Boyd’s helpful commentary in clarifying this difficulty between “realism” and “illusion.”)

³The story about Virgil, a blind man who regained his sight after having cataract operations on both eyes, relates the difficulties of the conflict between sequential perception and spatial perception. This dilemma ended up being an unresolvable conflict for him. After several years of trying to visually “see,” Vigil became psychically blind to end his torment so that he could blindly “see” once more. See Sacks’ (1995) chapter “To See or Not to See.”

against artists for their effects of *simulacra*. Presumably psychic health consists of “good” family value television (a euphemism for television programming that is both educationally and morally proper). Listening to Pat Boone songs and having a V-chip (a “violence” chip) installed in one’s television set will insure psychological health. Teaching and consuming the best works of art and literature in the schools will nurture “good” upright and caring citizens. Such reasoning can be traced to the most influential educator of the nineteenth century: the British school inspector Matthew Arnold (1869). His most recent revivalists in higher education are such figures as the late Alan Bloom (1987), E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1987), Roger Kimball (1990) and Dinesh D’Souza (1991). In art education we have Ralph Smith’s (1988) crusade for “excellence” and the Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) curriculum sponsored by The Getty Center for Education in the Arts (Feinstein, 1988).

Lesson 2: *Theologica Moralis*: Art and Evil

The deception of the *trompe-l’oeil* effect obviously both fascinates (charms) and threatens, a threat which must be contained. The threat is that of an “evil eye,” an “eye” that is capable of arresting movement and killing life. In some stories the moment of punishment is the moment of *looking*. We have only to think of the story of Sodom (Genesis, 19) where Yahweh turns Lot’s wife into salt for *looking* back at Yahwah’s destruction of the city. The gorgon Medusa in Greek mythology was capable of turning men into stone, paralyzing them into terror when they *gazed* at her face. From the Biblical injunction against worshipping false idols, to Bernard of Clairvaux’s complaint to Abbot William that monks were *fascinated* by the *representations* of animals and fabulous beasts that flourished on the capitals of Romanesque cathedrals rather than studying the text of the Bible (see Jauss, 1982), theological discourse has *always* supposed the *natural* propensity of “man” to be “drawn in,” deceived or be fooled by the artist’s *trompe-l’oeil* effects. Throughout history, iconoclasm is a well-documented phenomenon, perhaps the Calvinist and Islamic injunctions against “graven” images of any kind are the severest and most puritanical examples.

From a Biblical point of view the question of the *trompe-l’oeil* is heavily coded by moral injunctions. There is no “good eye” in the Old or New Testament (Lacan, 1979, p. 119). It is always maleficent. The lust for sex and being caught by the pornographic image underpins

the allegory of “man’s” fall from God’s grace. Sex remains demonic. Like the bird in Pliny’s story the male uncontrollably “pecks” at the female in a “natural” state of hysterical sexual frenzy. It requires little theoretical effort to see how the sensuousness of the material body, rather than the soul or the mind, is coded as being evil, its lot cast with the animal kingdom in its inability to participate in higher transcendental realms. The ontology of the medieval “Great Chain of Being” (Lovejoy, 1978) hierarchically ordered the animals in their possible relation to the transcendental spirit of God. Slithering on the bottom was, of course, the snake which transports us to the allegory of the Garden of Eden. This debased and lowest of creatures, perhaps first associated with goddess worship as a symbol of phallic control (e.g., in predynastic Egypt a picture of a cobra was the hieroglyph for the word Goddess, see Stone, 1976), is evil personified, prompting the woman to use her body to lure man into sin which formed the stain that “mared” the purity of God’s light by the reddish glow of the apple’s bite. Adam and Eve must struggle against Nature in order to survive as Adam and Eve are cast out of the illusionary, symbiotic, and fantasmatic relationship with God to fend for themselves.

There is yet another aspect to the allegory of the Garden which again brings up the question of sight. When Adam and Eve face God they do not *lack*. They seem completely under His watchful eye, an originary *trompe-l’oeil* effect where *only* His gaze is beneficent. Having “sinned,” however, they fall out of His “grace,” and consequently must face the “evil” outside the Garden. Now as incomplete creatures Adam and Eve must face the “*imagos of the[ir] fragmented body*” (Lacan, 1977, p. 11), e.g.,

images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body. One only has to listen to children aged between two and five playing, alone or together, to know that the pulling off of the head and the ripping open of the belly are themes that occur spontaneously to their imagination, and that this is corroborated by the experience of the doll torn to pieces. (ibid.)

Children engage in acts of sadism and masochism—hate and pain (e.g., as temper tantrums and crying) when society fails to meet

their needs and demands. They are frustrated by being uncoordinated and not “whole.” Emotions of both love (pleasure and the life drive) and hate (reality and the death drive) emerge as children struggle to preserve and maintain themselves.⁴ As newly born children, Adam and Eve possess an ontological aggressiveness. There is a voracious aspect of their sight that is marked by “evil.” The eye has consumptive scopic desires. To be whole and complete, their *eye* (metonymic for the self as I) is capable of an “evil look” in its thirst to survive and possess some Thing that will make it complete and satisfied. Evil, which is another name for the “death-drive” in Freud’s system, is ontologically before the Good, and in this sense “radical” (see Žižek, 1993).⁵ We could say it is the “original stain of nature,” that is, the Christian concept, “original sin.” By way of evil, “man” wrests himself from animal instinctual rhythms, that is, “he” overcomes the dominion of pathological natural impulses. In other words it is Evil that enables man to free himself from the “nature” which “he” shares with animals. Evil as the death drive “installs” the system of pleasure. It makes way for the Good! “Man’s” originary choice is not between Good and Evil as oppositions, rather it is between the pathology of Being (our animalness) and radical Evil (overcoming it).

Lesson 3: The Moment of Blindness as *Objet a*

What has all this to do with our discussion concerning art education? It seems that certain forms of hyperviolence, i.e., in particular aestheticized violence which appeals only to ethical indifference and consumptive gratitude, require more than a hysterical reactionary response by self-appointed moral guardians of society. The aesthetics of specularity in the media and the continued commercialization of the arts should give art educators pause to rethink “visual literacy” in this postmodernist era. “Visual literacy” involves more than the outdated understandings of perception (Rudolf Arnheim for instance). It requires a recognition that unconscious fantasy permeates all our conscious

⁴Space does not allow me to elaborate on the importance of the “death instinct” as a second-order principle which governs, founds, or “installs” the pleasure principle which governs our psychic life where we systematically seek pleasure and avoid pain. This is brilliantly articulated in comprehensible language by Gilles Deleuze in his chapter “The Death Instinct” (1991).

life. I have noted that the *trompe-l'oeil* effect is considered “evil” and a threat, as well as a seduction. From the psychoanalytic point of view, it shows the subject’s lack of presence because the image’s potential to mislead and deceive the eye seemingly happens *without* mediation and modification. The transaction appears “causal,” i.e., as a natural and unrestrained response.

The second part of Pliny’s story, which involves the curtain as *trompe-l'oeil* presents a different scenario. The eye is “taken in” only momentarily. The entire aesthetic effect depends on the eventual recognition that the painting is *illusionism* rather than illusion, as Mitchell (1994) argues. To deceive a human being, as Parrhasios makes clear, is to present the spectator with a painting of a curtain or “veil” (*linteum*). What incites Zeuxis is not the veil *per se*, but what was “behind” it—which was precisely *nothing!* Lacan (1979) reads Pliny’s story as an illustration of unconscious “desire.” It was the seduction of Zeuxis’ desire that did him in. What attracts and satisfies a spectator in a *trompe-l'oeil* is a moment when, by a mere shift in the gaze, the spectator is able to realize that the representation does not move with the gaze, but indeed is merely a *trompe-l'oeil*. The picture does not compete with “reality” *per se*, but with what is *beyond* appearance. Lacan reads this “beyond” as *objet petit a*—the fascinatory element introduced by the gaze—which, in psychoanalytic parlance, is the desire to be complete and whole. One’s *lack* is filled by the fascinatory object. A successful work of art that the artist or student either consumes or produces is one which satisfies this lack. It provides psychic satisfaction and makes one feel more “alive.” It is here that the pedagogical task for the art educator becomes difficult, since “visual literacy” in this sense is an art education based on this “blind spot” of desire. Let me try to explain what is at stake here by returning to the Pliny story.

Paradoxically, in a painting that has momentarily “caught” the

⁵The ontological system that is being questioned here is (again) the modernist ethic proposed by Kant. Following the work of Slavoj Žižek, Joan Copjec and Jean-Luc Nancy (Nancy, 1993) the claim is that Kant was unable to accommodate and account for the question of “radical evil” in his system. “Radical evil” is the exception that deconstructs his systemic ethics based on reason.

spectator into its lure (its labyrinth of meaning) there is a blind spot or absence present in the central field of the picture. This is what Zeuxis does not “see” but desires. It is what he is “blind” to. In other words, every representation contains within itself a metaphorical “vanishing point” which indicates the limit of the field of vision and consciousness, just as there is always a vanishing point on the horizon of our field of perception. It is this point, or limit which can be equated with Lacan’s notion of *objet a*. *Objet a* is what “frames” vision psychically, not perceptually. It is removed from the field of visual reality which frames it. A slightly modified diagram introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan’s foremost practitioner, as it appears in Žizek (1992, p. 94), demonstrates this framing of visual experience.

We see here that *objet a* frames our psychic Imaginary “vision.” Lacan made a distinction between the eye and the gaze. The eye (or the look) stands for the geometrical, visual grammar of the current historical hyperconventional “realism” (art as mimesis or versimilitude in Pliny’s case), and the gaze stands for the subject’s position within this grammar. Whereas the eye (look) represents the conscious, self-reflective subject of knowledge or *cogito*, the desiring subject of the gaze leads us to the unconscious desire for an unknown object which in Lacanian parlance is (once more) *objet a*. The *objet a* is something separate from the subject, *that* which the subject lacks to constitute itself as psychically “whole” or complete. Lacan argues that the primordial *objet a* of satisfaction is the mother’s breast.

The blind spot (*objet a*) which appears in the hallucinatory mirror after the initial suture into the picture, represents the limitation of the subject’s consciousness. *Objet a*, where Zeuxis’ directed his gaze, has no specular image, no visibility, and represents the other side of

vision and consciousness. It belongs to the unconscious, and forms the "cause" of desire. Recognizing that such desire ensnared him, evoked a "smile" ("delight" from Zeuxis when he realized his own expectations had been met. The imagined object of his own desire had "framed" him. In other words, his gaze became inverted and directed back at himself.) Based on the illusion of seeing only a mirror of reality (as represented by the veil where there is no blind spot), to the moment when he realizes that he and his surprise are the object of Parrhasius' gaze its blind spot has now appeared. The gaze of the Other (e.g., Parrhasius) *decenters* his vision. Zeuxis is no longer the eye ("I") of consciousness seeing what he wants to see. Rather he is seen in a way that he may not want to be seen (self-consciously with "egg" on his face). His initial illusion was broken when he "downcast" his eyes. The "true" nature of envy presents itself in such a gesture. As Lacan (1979) remarks, "*invidia* [envy] comes from *videre*," to see (p. 115). It is triggered when someone gazes at someone else who—seemingly—possesses *objet a*, and is, therefore, complete and satisfied, for example, when a little child sees his younger brother at his mother's breast. Envy here is not jealousy, nor is it directed at possessing a particular object (the child who looks at his younger brother does not want to possess the breast). Rather, it is directed at the illusion that someone else is whole and complete. In Zeuxis case that Parrhasius might be fulfilled by possessing *objet a*. The lesson Lacan teaches us here is that *desire is the desire of the Other*.

The curtain or veil is identified by Lacan as a particular kind of *trompe-l'oeil* which he playfully calls a "*dompe-regard* . . . the taming, civilizing, and charming power of the function of the picture" (1979, pp. 111; 116). A *dompe-regard* evokes "downcasts" eyes. It is, therefore, a turn to the "good." Zeuxis recognizes that he has been "framed." But this "frame" had to precede his moment of "knowledge" in order to "tame" his envious gaze. Zeuxis had to avert his gaze and admit failure. By perceiving what was non-perceivable within himself (the blind spot as the "nothing" behind the veil), Zeuxis provides an exemplary case for the West's lesson of coming to grips with desire of the Other—an ethical act which refers to the interrogation of one's own response to Things in relation to the Other. Animals are not capable of doing although humans share with them an Imaginary realm. An oscillation between illusion and illusion-*ism* has to take place if such an ethics is to succeed. The power of

the image has to be continually overcome. The “good” becomes defined as the overcoming of deceptive appearances. These could include the “lure” of advertising, ideology critique, pornography, and of course, exposing the panoptic surveillance of a spectacular society. The paradox of the artist in such an ontological position is that s/he must work with the arrestment of life and the movement of the self as a way to “ward off” the evil eye. Art becomes a moral endeavor. While banning and pacifying the evil eye, painting formally relies on its arresting function. Both *movement* and *arrest* form the dialectic of painting, as the paradox of the constancy of change itself.⁶ Every work of art must necessarily be an act of *failure*, or, perhaps a momentary victory, in the sense that art can never satisfy fully and completely psychic wholeness. One thinks here of such industrious artists as Giacometti whose search to find the “human essence” after uncountable attempts was, in this sense, a *failure*. Giacometti shows us that there is also the danger of becoming so obsessed with a Thing, that the Thing can begin to *devour* the artist. In other words, the artist, like the spectator is no less immune to the threat of *trompe-l’oeil* which constitutes an undoing of the psychological defenses. Such *ob*-session, like something which is *ob*-scene, indicates crossing a boundary into a perverse and psychotic world (next lesson).

Lesson 4: When the World Stares Back and Objects Possess Us!

In some moments we have what might be properly called psychotic experiences, when that which is “normally” invisible to us in our everyday perception, reveals itself. These are moments when “objects” stare back at us, as if they possessed the gaze. Rather than being in control of our own gaze, at moments *objet a* appears to peer at us. We may have auditory hallucinations. (For example, Norman’s mother’s voice in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*.) These are typically uncanny, unnerving, anxiety ridden moments when the unconscious non-perception “speaks.” We sometimes experience a flash of the phenomenon when we gaze at the mirror but don’t recognize ourselves. The uncanny evokes an odd moment of anxiety. There are experiences that make us feel as though we are gazed at when no one is there. Art objects, especially films, can show us what we don’t want to see by forcing their gaze back upon us. In other words, paradoxically, we vanish as subjects when such objects “eat” us up as in David Cronenberg’s biography of Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (Thomas & Cronenberg, 1991). The presence of *objet a* constitutes the threat—the undoing of a psychological defense—

causing a split or division within ourselves (written as \$, Lacan's symbol for the split-subject of desire). We are suddenly self-exposed when we recognize that we are seen "being seen." Freud (1923/1961) captured such dread and horror through his examination of the German word *Unheimlich* (frightening, eerie, sinister) which is related to *Heimlich* that has the ambivalent meaning of either homely and familiar, or hidden and secret. The *un* of *Unheimlich* marks the return of repressed material. We can say that what is *Heimlich* belongs to the "look," visibility, and the symbolic order of language, while *Unheimlich* belongs to the gaze, *objet a*, the imaginary order, and the unconscious. William Blake's visions present a paradigmatic example of such perverse perception. Kandinsky (1964) offers a more "modern" example of such animistic perception when he wrote, "Everything 'dread' trembled. Not only the stars, moon, woods, flowers of which the poets sing, but also the cigarette butt in the ashtray . . . everything shows me its face, its innermost being; its secret soul, which is more often silent than heard" (pp. 23-24).

The familiarity (*Heimlich*) of art which is regulated by intentionality and a centered point-of-view, the "eye" or I of consciousness, can act as a screen against such moments. When art is familiar it appears harmless (less harmful). This explains the strong impulse for realism in the arts by young people and adults alike. The (over)emphasis on "beauty" and properly distanced realism, represses the fear of the sublime as the uncanny "evil" eye, and provides a "normal" perception which centers a coherent subject-spectator rather than decenters vision in which the "world," or Big Other, is gazing at you—panoptically and scopophilicly (i.e., voyeuristically). Masks, puppets, and ventriloquism, which projects the voice "elsewhere," provide a mediation from this panoptic gaze and voice.⁷ These are forms of a homeopathic or prophylactic "eye" which enable us to effectively deal with this potentially psychotic "worldly" gaze which exists everywhere and nowhere. Realistic art participates in the *dompte-regard* as a process of taming and reassuring our normal perception. Like masks, realism in representation requires that the spectator adopt the stance of the fetishist. Fetishism requires that we undertake a simultaneous acceptance and denial of what we see. We believe that what is represented reflects the real world, yet at the same time, we recognize that the representation is only a

⁷Lacan who was a good friend of Merleau-Ponty drew many of his examples of art from him and, of course, Surrealists like René Magritte. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and his interest in Cézanne were Lacan's points of departure.

representation. Fetishism in this sense is a psychically “healthy” response for “normative” perception. The fetishistic cult object of indigenous peoples, such as a talisman, acts as a “counter-eye” to guard against evil. In psychoanalytic theory, fetishism, as the binding together of belief and knowledge, acts as a defense against castration which signifies to the subject his/her own emptiness—that is, the fundamental splitting of subjectivity (\$) as ideal ego (the look) and ego ideal (the gaze). But the *trompe-l’oeil* can produce an uncanny effect, a hyperbolization of positioning the spectator in a situation in which there is a separation between belief and knowledge. The contradiction between these two events becomes more apparent as the gap between the Imaginary and the Symbolic registers in the conscious mind. For the *trompe-l’oeil* to “work,” there has to be a “delay” in the knowledge that seems real is indeed artifice. The longer the interval between illusion and *illusionism*, the more anxiety, fright, and horror the spectator can feel. This seems to be particularly the case within the horror genre.

A disturbing example in this regard is the 1993 Belgium film *Man Bites Dog*, directed and written by three film students: Remy Belvraux, Andre Bonzel and Benoit Poetvoorde. Shot in black and white in the style of a documentary, it recounts the story of several film students who wish to document a psychopathic killer. As the story proceeds they become implicated in the killings, and the psychopath eventually kills the camera crew. The spectator is never certain whether these events were staged or real. The experience is as repulsive as a “snuff” film in which a “real” victim is tortured, raped, maimed, shot, and killed. There is no “acting” involved. The filmmakers of *Man Bites Dog* seem to have consciously eschewed acting. The disturbance of its effects are increased by the sheer “ordinariness” of the actors. No one in the film is “recognizable” or famous enough to indicate to the viewer that this is all artifice. The moment of *illusionism* never comes. The spectator remains “locked” - trapped - in its illusion, which is a profoundly disturbing experience. Such films are “rare.” It is obviously this fear that Boomer moralists are reacting against, although they target violence indiscriminately, since they are unable to articulate their unease easily.

I am not developing aspects of the voice which forms another object *a* in Lacan’s system, the mother’s voice being its originary function. This is merely to recognize its power here. See Silverman’s (1992) “Fassbinder and Lacan: A reconsideration of gaze, look and image” for an understandable account for the gaze in its capacity as society’s Big Other.

The violence of a film such as *Man Bites Dog* is “too real”—“too close.” When it loses its fetishistic, i.e., its artificial “staged” effect, the eyes cannot “blink” and become downcast or averted. Cinema in the moral reactionary’s view, ought to act as an institutionalized control of the effects of *trompe-l’oeil*. Art’s *dompte-regard* is supposed to teach us the moral lessons which surround our desires; to make the invisible visible in Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) turn of phase, and to help us perceive the imperceptible. This has been the West’s legacy: the triumph of rationality over our emotions and passions; the repression of the demons that come at us out of the sublime as a way to face the amorality of nature. Pliny’s account of the illusion of realism, taken in its broader context (see Mitchell, 1994), was for the greater progress of the political economy of Athens. The public function of “realistic” art, by such artists as Apollodorus, Timanthes, Androcydes, Eupompus, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, was its role in political propaganda and mass spectacle, as means to propagate noble genealogy. But this was not all. Pliny’s recounting of the story compared the superiority of humans over animals in their ability to overcome the illusions that captured them. Rather than being enslaved by the image, Pliny argued that humans could become self-conscious, as they become aware that a mere image had “taken them in.” With the proper distance such freedom could be achieved from the power of illusions that arrested their attention. Interpellation by the image could be overcome through criticism, ideology critique and demystification, a long standing agenda for educators of the Left.

Concluding Lesson: The Hidden Binaries

Having justified why art education should continue to both pursue the fetishization of objects (as forms of realism) as well as continually break the spells of *trompe-l’oeil* so as to achieve the “right” Kantian distance and avoid the pathology of psychosis, there is of course, something very “wrong” and troubling with this modernist endeavor. I will conclude with a discussion of some of these troubling issues. Pliny’s story sets up a self/other binary in which the first hierarchy is between animals and humans. Humans can overcome their animal nature, animals can not overcome theirs. A strong anthropocentrism asserts itself, one which John Berger (1980) identifies as standing for all forms of otherness: class, race, sex and gender. Not only have animals become throughout history progressively more and more marginalized, but race, sex, gender and class are represented by images of subhuman brutishness, bestial appetite, and mechanical servility. This is one side of

the anthropocentrism which has displaced God with Man at the apex of Modernism's inversion of the "Great Chain of Being." We must rethink the question of nature's animism from the perspective of an ecological consciousness and a green aesthetics (jagodzinski, 1987, 1992). The sublime sense of nature is coded as evil both in scientific and theological discourse. From this yet another self/other binary reproduces itself as the West and the "Rest." The Western eye presents a division between an animistic art which is caught up with vision quests and in which one seeks guidance from the spirit world (see Highwater, 1981), and a rationalism that represses such "monsters" (not spirits). Do we then follow Freud (1923/1961) in his claim that archaic animistic knowledge is more "primitive"? that, before the advent of scientific rationalism the world was more "psychotic"? and that the West is therefore more "progressive"?

There is yet another self/other binary at work here which is every bit as fundamental as the other two, and this is the recognition that for the masculine subject, woman is the *trompe-l'oeil par excellent*. First, and perhaps most obviously, is that males have viewed women as closer to Nature than they are. She lactates, menstruates, gives birth to children, socializes (tames) them, and "services" the body through such nurturing actives as cooking the meals and looking after the *Heim* (house) (see Ortner, 1974). Further, she is the one who wears the mask (the masquerade of make-up), which, on the one hand is her "lure," and also a sign that she needs more "protection." More frail and susceptible than her male counterpart (recall the Garden scene) she is less rational. Perceptually, according to psychologists like Witkin (1949/50), she is said to be more "field dependent" than men who are "field independent." In other words, the lures of the environment ensnare her. This view supposes that women are less analytical than men, e.g., that they can not read maps, and only tell men drivers "where to go" (pun intended). Accordingly, the brain of women is said to be wired differently. Psychosexual brain differences put her "spatial imagination" at a big disadvantage (see Fausto-Sterling, 1985 for rebuttals). Being "field dependent" she is suspect to the *trompe-l'oeil* effects and in the Imaginary register.⁸ Although she dwells in the same "house" (*Heim*) as man she is always a threat. Her "mask" (masquerade) can change as the "virgin mother" turns into a she-devil by simply applying "too" much make-up and changing her looks. This is a familiar cinematic trope (e.g., recently played out in Renny Harlin's film, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*). She can arouse dread and horror as the "phallic Mother." Like Medusa, she can turn a man to stone. Everything that is coded as

feminine, as “body,” loses distance and the right moral attitude since the masculine and the feminine are “incomplete selves” who are locked together by lack and desire.⁹ The West’s concept of art privileges the spectator as masculine (the distance of knowledge) and the image as feminine (the closeness of belief). If we are to believe the controversial Paglia (1990) the Western contemplative, conceptual eye of art was born in Egypt (p. 50). Since that time the conflict of identity has remained, as Nietzsche described it, a struggle of a will-to-power between the forces of Dionysus and Apollo.¹⁰ Lacan (1992) in his seminar on ethics in the 60s developed the concept of the “sinthome” as that which gives the subject its ontological consistency. Žižek (1992) writes that the “sinthome is a psychotic kernel that can neither be interpreted (as symptom) nor ‘traversed’ (as fantasy)—what can we do with it, then?” he asks, “Lacan’s answer is to identify with the sinthome” (p. 137). Man’s Western Eye has been unable to identify with its sublime Other. In other words, its inability to face *that* which it fears most, *that* which provides it with its very identity.

* * *

The uncanny (or *umheimlich*) has become an important consideration in postmodern aesthetic because it acts as a challenge to representation—to the acquiescence of fetishism *per se*. It provides the potential to make us see the world not as ready-made for our description, depiction, and portrayal. Rather it presents it in a constant process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. The success of recent television shows, such as *The X Files*, *Millennium* and *Dark Skies*, among young viewers is an indication that they are fascinated with the uncertainty of the times. The sublime remains the Other in Kant’s aesthetic of beauty. A working through the West’s realistic repression of the sublime can downcast the eye in yet another way. When it can not bear to look—but must face its own evil—art travels upon a road that is perhaps too dangerous for the classroom (and Hollywood) because of the clanging heard by moral Boomers outside classroom doors. Disney Productions seems driven to satiate the Western eye until it becomes ob-ese, dripping with mawkish sentimentality. Certainly opening up Pandora’s Box to explore repressed perversities provides little economic rewards when compared with the reproductive, consumptive hegemony of realism and its presumption of an innocent, transparent image.

What I have in mind can be illustrated by a scene and a film by two

director-explorers of the postmodern sublime—the two David’s—Lynch and Cronenberg—one American, the other Canadian. Both investigate the repressed image and interrogate it rather than preserve it. Radical evil is pushed to the point where it reverses itself into moral revelation. David Lynch in *Wild At Heat* presents a rape fantasy so “close” to the surface that it answers to the patriarchal “she made me do it” by making the scene/seen so painful to watch that the audience is left squirming in their seats¹¹ (Montgomery & Lynch, 1990). In a lonely run-down motel room in the middle of nowhere, William Defoe asserts unrelenting pressure on Laura Dern to yield to his desires. He touches and squeezes her, invading her space of intimacy and says “fuck me, fuck me” over and over again. The ugly scene drags on to the point where we see Dern slowly surrendering to his suggestions. The camera pans to her clenched hand which slowly opens up in compliance as she faintly answers “yes.” The audience is released from any more pain when Defoe makes an about face and says, “No thanks. Not today. I’ve to go.” What makes the scene/seen so excruciating and excessively cruel is the realization that Dern has been psychically and not physically raped. Her secret desire to be brutally raped, the very kernel of her being, has been stirred up, and exposed. This makes the rape excessively humiliating, and, in turn, stretches the gap of illusion to a point where the audience can no longer bear to watch the exposure of Dern’s secret.

On the same register of the sublime, is David Cronenberg’s recent

⁸It should be pointed out that there is the object relations theory of feminist psychoanalysis like Nancy Chodrow (1978) and an entire movement of feminist gynocriticism (predominately lesbian) in literature and art which supports such an assumption (see Frueh, Langer, & Raven, 1994). In this view the essence of femininity and hence woman is to be found in the imaginary pre-Oedipal register where daughters are still attached to their mothers. From a Lacanian feminist position, e.g., Constance Penley, Jacqueline Rose, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan such essentialism oversimplifies the Oedipal difficulties which sex/gender present.

⁹Here I wish to avoid setting up a hetero/homo binary. Following Lacan’s logic in his ‘formulae of sexuation’ (1982) masculine and feminine represent ‘logical’ positions. A gay or lesbian couple, like a hetero couple, are split into masculine and feminine positions.

¹⁰More radical feminists like Mary Daly (1978) claim that this opposition does not go far enough. Dionysus and Apollo are “two faces of the same god” (p.64). She claims that Dionysus is Zeus in his young form. “Dionysus was in fact his own father” (ibid.).

movie *Crash*, based on J. G. Ballard's novel about sex and car crashes (Thomas, Lantos, & Cronenberg, 1996). The viewer can comprehend the movie when one recognizes that the characters in the story are already "dead." Pleasure turned into pain can only be understood by making the death-drive present. These characters stare evil in the face, and we are asked to stare with them—if we can. The images are far from alluring and erotic. Sex is presented in a desexualized fashion—as a drive (*Trieb*), as a need or a demand that is not caught up in the dialectics of desire. Sex and metal come together, even more debased and void of spirit than any animal. Hard. Cold. Voices show no emotion. Their bodies are wedded to metal prosthetically, sometimes to the car itself. They present the antithesis of transnational capitalist fantasy of cyberspace as the disappearance of the body and the cyborgs it breeds. This is the pain of technology gone awry, in which the car crashes of Jayne Mansfield and James Dean are revered as heroic and iconic exemplars of the suicidal road kill of 50s America (mis)perceived Other—Hollywood's leading ladies and delinquent youth. The reply to the current Boomer nostalgia should be obvious.

On that happy note, I appropriately end this essay on the 31st of October, 1996. Halloween. Trick or Treat?

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¹¹This example in a modified form comes from Slavoj Zizek in a lecture series presented at the University of Alberta in August of 1996.

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