Grasping the Site/Sight /Cite of the Image: A Lacanian Explication

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Reading images psychoanalytically from a Lacanian perspective has its challenges. The first task of this essay is to provide a way through what is often taken to be difficult and impenetrable theory, to explicate how the homology site/sight/cite can be understood in any act of critical perception. Its second task is to make distinctions between a psychoanalytic understanding of the subject as being ‘split’ or divided (as represented by the matheme ‘$,’ Lacan’s symbol for this form of subjectivity) when applied to art, as opposed to a naïve realist subject of representation or a savvy poststructuralist (decentered) subject of postmodernity. For this second task, the question of what constitutes an ‘object’ for a subject in psychoanalysis comes front and center when discussing visual culture.

To begin then with the homology: the first site is identified with Lacan’s psychic register of the Real (capitalized to distinguish it from the ‘real’ of naïve reality—the idea that reality is solely what the senses reveal). The Real is the very opposite of ‘reality’ as such. The Real was Lacan’s punning claim that there is a psychic level that eludes our ability to see or to say anything about it. The Real is always present, however its presence can only be felt retroactively and only be theorized negatively; that is to say, the unconscious Real reveals itself by what Freud referred to as acts of Verneinung (negation) in the symbolic register, as well as acts of Verleugnung (disavowal) in the Imaginary
register, while an act of Verwerfung (foreclosure, rejection) in the Real meant a fall into psychosis where the authority of the Law had been rejected. Language itself becomes objectified and disembodied. The subject finds no place in the social symbolic order. Verneinung is attributed to the level of speech acts where conscious negation hides its opposite, unconscious affirmation. Verleugnung concerns an act of conscious perception where the sight of something is denied (leugnen) and immediately redirected to a fetishized object to fill in the missing gap created by the perceptual disavowal. Lastly, the foreclosure of the Law, Verwerfung, means that something is “thrown away” (werfen), dismissed or refused. In Lacanian terms this is the refusal of The Name-of-the-Father in patriarchal societies like our own. Overseeing the general symbolic order are the acts of general repression (Verdrängung) as well as misunderstanding (Verdichtung), in addition to Verneinung (negation) as previously mentioned (see Lacan 1993, pp. 82-84). The point being that all of these acts are anti-hermeneutic in nature: they defy interpretation (sense-making) as well know it.

It seems perhaps odd for visual cultural art educators to cope with a dimension that alludes both speech and sight, but this is precisely what is being claimed for a psychoanalytic understanding of the image and its critical interpretation. The Real refers to what is absent, outside the frame of perception and potentially abyssal in its comprehension, a variation of which is referred to as mise-en-abîme when potentially a story within a story is never-ending in its multiple enframings, such as the final scene in the sci-fi film Men in Black where the camera telescopes away from the earth reaching a point where two alien creatures are playing dice with the earth. Further telescoping from this scene is possible ad infinitum. It is possible, of course, to reverse this same telescopic frame within a frame in the opposite direction as in the films of Charles and Ray Eames such as the Powers of Ten (1977) and enter the bodies of the two MIB characters, from which the scene started,
into the recesses of quantum physics, never coming to a final resting place of 'matter.' Matter itself becomes ephemeral, but now has 'force,' or immanence as theorized by Gilles Deleuze throughout his long career.

The Real is always with us in the act of looking, and it is site specific. Calling it site specific means that the Real always refers to a singularity, a singularity that enables a frame to emerge. If this sounds too mystical or confusing at this moment, I ask the reader to be patient as this essay unfolds. The Real, not being signified nor figured, can only show itself topologically in the singularity of a site (see Wajcman, 1999). It is where the subject for Lacan dwells: not the subject of seeing or speaking, of sight and speech—which he refers to as the ego or me (moi), nor is this a grammatical subject that language offers by way of numerous pronouns that can be occupied as we read; rather it is a subject of the unconscious—the singularity of "I" or Je, as traced by memories, forgetfulness, associations and disassociations, traumas, loses, mourning, melancholia and so on—all the 'other side' of one's known autobiography. All looking involves this unconscious subject. It comes into play despite ourselves. It is an excess that always betrays our self-assured confidence that we say what we mean and mean what we say.

The second sight seems simple enough. It refers to the Imaginary psychic register—to the figure, to the framing of phenomenological perception, and to Gestalt psychology. This, of course, is the place where visual cultural education hegemonically dwells through its numerous cognitive perceptual schemas and nets. Yet, this is precisely the register that Lacan identifies as the seat of fantasy and mis/re/cognition (méconnaissance). It is "mis" cognition in the sense that the imaginary refers to a mirror-self that is spectral, and a "re" cognition in the sense that we have no choice but to identify with this alter-ego spectral self (our imago) when we are in and of this world (as dasein). Paradoxically, it is also the psychic register where creative play can happen to break
the perceptual constants that frame us. As the seat of the conscious self, it is where the conflicts of vision are at play. However, as shall be shown, within this “ideological” playground of signification lays the dark stain of the Real as objet a, framing the imaginary.

Lastly, cite refers to the Symbolic order, the order of language and the signifier whose status can be iconic as a particular cultural code structures our ideologies that are either consonant with out Imaginary fantasies, or resistant to them. The cultural Law governs this Symbolic order, however, there is always a “state of exemption” which brings in the shadowy “obscene supplement,” the clandestine activities that take place outside the Law knowingly sanctioned by those who claim to be upholding it.¹

With this preliminary exploration of the homology site/cite/sight in place, which knots Lacan’s three psychic orders (Real, Imaginary, Symbolic) in complex ways, I turn to what makes psychoanalysis an important theory to help us think through the banality of the image in postmodernity. I use the descriptor banality purposefully here to indicate that in contemporary society the mediated image surrounds us everywhere. Virilio (1988) gets it right when he said,

From now on everything passes through the image. The image has priority over the thing, the object, and sometimes even the physically-present being. Just as real time, instantaneous, had priority over space. Therefore the image is invasive and ubiquitous. Its role is not to be in the domain of art, the military domain or the technical domain, it is to be everywhere, to be reality ... I believe that there is a war of images ... And I can tell you my feelings in another way: winning today, whether it’s a market or a fight is merely not losing sight of yourself (pp. 4-5).

It is this ubiquity of images that makes them banal. Yet, the question emerges as to why certain images are then invested with a force that makes them stand out for the viewer, and catch his or her
attention. Such a question can be answered by coming to an understanding of Lacan’s notion of the object—more precisely—objet a in his lexicon whose singularity belong to the Real. It refers to the haunts of absence and the cause of desire—that which invests the banal image with a “magic” or force of its own. To explain this I start with a joke.

**A Joke: Lenin in Moscow**

A Moscow art exhibit displayed a picture (figure 1) of Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife in bed with a young member of the Komsomol— the Russian “Communist Union of Youth.” Below the work was displayed its title “Lenin in Warsaw.” A visitor, after closely
examining the image, and then reading the title became confused. So he politely asked the guide, “but where is Lenin?” The guide, quietly and without a wink turned to the visitor and replied, “Lenin is in Warsaw.”

The visitor’s mistake occurs because s/he presumes a Saussrian semiology (1966), that is, a direct representational relationship between the image and its title—as if there was a direct relation between a sign and its referent. This has been the dominant assumption around for quite some time. Art educators have become a lot smarter since the time of this joke that has been around at least since 1918. More specifically, Visual Culture art educators have been clever enough to embrace a semiology that has taken a poststructuralist turn. The dominant field of visual research that has embraced these poststructuralist tenants maintains that there is no metalanguage, attempting to escape the naiveté of “presence” (as implied in the joke) — that vision has a direct access to the referent, still embraced by many in the visual field through such claims as “art speaks for itself;” all we need to do is mystically “feel it” and so on. Or, yet others who embrace a phenomenological perspective maintaining that the “thing-in-itself” — the referent through visual visual realm for separate and distinct text that haunt the of language. During formalism, the works of Mark Rothko (e.g., figure 2) have been notorious for promoting this direct access of meaning through the color field alone. This metaphysical tradition of modernism does not easily go away.
Let us get back to the poststructuralist position—brought on by the digital age—and address those visual art researchers who have embraced a cultural studies approach where hybrid forms of art, combining visual and textual forms together have become standard practice, such as the well-known works of Barbara Kruger (fig.3). Kruger’s work turns the advertisement message in on itself. The play of the signifier had become so pervasive in advertising in the 80s, so much so, that the process of interpellation became the subject of her art, broadly drawing on the theoretical writing of Althusser (2001).

Figure 3. Barbara Kruger

In poststructuralism the position of metalanguage has been rejected and replaced with the ground zero of ordinary language and the banality of everyday images. Ordinary language and the banal image from this poststructuralist claim is its own metalanguage, which leads us into the quagmires of multiple interpretations—the game of
endless semiosis that hermeneuticians are fond of playing to extract multiple meanings to answer, for instance, in the above figure, “Why is the girl making this face when it comes to money and love?” We have here a self-referential textual language and visual imaginary based on difference that is savvy in its claim that the referent can never be known. We have a distancing from “reality” that is constructed and reconstructed, the endless slipping signifiers which de(sign)er capitalism requires to sell more products. As many critics pointed out, it did not take long to commodify Kruger’s own output, establishing a “signature style” and selling her work at the art world boutique of Mary Boone Gallery, New York (Gleason 1999). In lieu of leftist activism, her radically chic style of sound-byte catch-phrases, meant to shock, came to a political dead end. The subject of her address can be read just as cynically as her savvy style itself. The object of her ridicule is not the media, the corporate sector nor patriarchy, but her contempt for the unreachable and unconcerned proletariat who seem to ignore the emancipation call by a moneyed leftist intelligentsia positioned in universities, colleges and in the culture industry. A disdain for the average working class person haunts her work, since her call to re-educate the “masses” fails to do much more than affirm that those who have the power to selectively consume, find mass consumption a vulgar business. This, then, is the quagmire of multiple interpretations: it relativizes all interpretations as simply being ideological, avoiding the social consequences that each reading claims for its “truth” value.

Visual art research, in its more critical poststructuralist manifestations, is engaged in sign wars (cultural wars), attempting to hijack the signifier back from designer capitalism, to decenter it, re-signify its meaning and so on. Kruger exemplifies such a liberalist process. Most of this in done to disrupt discourses, to foster critical thinking and emancipation by a good-intentioned leftist intelligentsia caught by their own situational contradictions of privilege—what I have
called elsewhere a form of “romantic resistance” (jagodzinski, 2003) whose roots go back to Dadaist tactics and the Situationists of the 50s and 60s where détournement and the psychogeography of dérivé were the critical strategies. The difference between the generations seems to be the failure of contemporary critical artists to exploit liminal spaces that cannot be so easily reterritorialized into commodity status—like Kruger, for instance. One thinks immediately of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), a cell of artists who have practiced forms of cyberspace and performative resistance art that eventually led up to the persecution by the FBI of one of its leaders, Steve Kurtz on charges of bio-terrorism.

This infinite self-referential and self-interpretive play of language in its visual translations — what often appear in Arts and Activities as school projects that quote art history, or that parody and pastiche the visual historical record and so on—to produce a self-reflexive, often ironic subject position, perhaps best exemplified by the long-standing television series The Simpsons, where self-referentiality abounds in laughter. It is a way of simply affirming that there is no escape from the capitalist designer imaginary. We live in an intermediated world of images that promotes a continuous cynical “winking” at its audience. All the monsters are beginning to lose their bite as the Disney machine turns them into animated cute and cuddly animals and robots. Tim Burton seems to be alone in trying to save the macabre. As “romantic resistance,” I would maintain that no artist can out-sign the capitalist enterprise—unless, of course goes outside the law in such forms as graffiti and social action performances. But even here, the streets have become policed, and graffiti has in turn become more and more like decoration for spectators rather than the civil disobedience and transgression it once carried. What spaces are left then for artists to exploit, which refuse reterritorialization by capitalist commodification? Within the institutions of the art gallery, museum, and avant-garde art departments in universities that attempt to “teach” subversive
strategies, an impossibility according to James Elkins (2001), leaves us often with a practice of Cadillac Marxism, a post-marxism of romantic resistance best illustrated (perhaps) by the cartoon below.

The poststructuralist ironic self-reflexive subject that is being shaped through such a curriculum of visual culture, but also including visual research, criticism, projects and so-forth—sometimes in the name of critical and emancipatory thought that does away with metalanguage and the naïve metaphysical presence of the image presents the case that there is no pure object-language and no pure visual imagery. No textual language and no visual imagery that would ever produce a purely transparent medium that captures "pure experience," and yet there is an insistence in the field of visual studies that "something" of this referent (that is the object) as unmediated reality comes through and affects us. So, on the one hand we have a naïve notion of representation that continues to mask itself as "reality," as in absurdity of "reality television," while on the other hand we have this savvy ironic self-reflexive subject who knows that it's a constructed representation through the use of elaborate rhetorical structuring devices, which either plays with it or tries to do it one better to expose this very constructedness.
I can, for instance, construct an ironic subject position by making a viewer aware that the first image (Lenin in Moscow) is simply a collage representation of the imaginary “real” painting of Lenin in Warsaw—if it ever existed in the first place (see figure 4).

I would—however—maintain that neither one of these positions, which form the binary of de(sign)er capitalism, is able to come to terms with the way images might be read with a “rigor” that disrupts the naiveté of the neoliberalist subject of presence and the so-called decentered multiple subject of poststructuralism. At this point, I could leave the reader hanging as to why the Lacanian subject is able to do just that—disrupt this binary. I present this puzzle in figure 5.
From a Lacanian standpoint, that "there is no metalanguage" and no meta-visual imagery has to be taken quite literally. All visual and textual language is an object-language; there can be no visual and textual language without an object—a referent always appears. Hence, even when it looks like the subject is caught-up in a web of self-referential movement, in the recesses of inter-textualities, apparently only speaking about itself, not truly being able to say what he or she wants or means to say, or means what he or she wants to say, there is an objective non-signifying "reference" to this movement.

Let us return to the joke, "Lenin in Warsaw"—to the absent third, Lenin—as the bearer of the prohibition of the sexual relationship. In the Lacanian psychoanalytic sense, this is the object of the picture. The title names the object that is lacking in the field of what is depicted, while the visitor remains caught by the trap of metalanguage. He establishes the same distance between the picture and the title as between the sign and its denoted object, as if the title speaks about the picture from a kind of objective distance, and then looks for its positive correspondence in the picture. A bit like the anecdote told of Picasso.

Picasso once found himself discussing art with an American GI who professed to dislike abstract paintings because they were excessively unrealistic. The artist said nothing and the
conversation moved on to such other subjects as the GI’s girlfriend - a snapshot of whom he proudly showed Picasso. “My,” Picasso exclaimed, examining the picture, “is she really that small?”

Again the work of art does not have a direct correspondence to reality.

So where is the object (as objet a) indicated by the title that is depicted? Like Magritte’s famous “This is not a Pipe”, (figure 6) the title and the picture is not connected by representation, but rather rest on the same surface, as part of the same continuity as the picture. “This is not a pipe” but a picture of the pipe is just one of the three possible readings of this work that Magritte mobilizes to problematize the referent which itself is about the impossibility of the referent.²

![figure 6](image)

The title and the picture in the joke’s case occupy the same plane as well, with the title embodying what is missing from the picture inside the same signifying plane as the picture itself occupies. Its distance from the picture is strictly internal. It is therefore not present to the Imaginary nor to symbolic language. It makes an incision or carves
into the picture such that something must fall (out) from the picture—not its title, but the object that is replaced by the title. Lenin’s absence is the void around which the picture frames itself—Lacan’s objet a. The picture becomes the materialization of Lenin’s absence, which is what “frames” the viewer’s vision (figure 7). Hopefully, this now explains the riddle of figure 5.

![figure 7](image)

Objet a is the missing piece that structures vision—as represented by the black rectangle whose abyss lies in the viewer. This is where the viewer connects to the image, the abyss of the joke. In this case its very absence is what makes the picture possible—to exist at all. If Lenin were around, Krupskaya may not have dared the sexual encounter with her young lover. The image, indeed, could be used as blackmail since it now refers to the obscene supplement as established by the patriarchal laws of marriage.

**Objet a: The Cause of Desire**

The title of the picture functions as the Freudian Vorstellungsrepräsentanz—the representative that is the substitute of
some other representation—a doubled representation. The German word is composed of two types of representations (*Vorstellung* and *Repräsentanz*). The title (as *Vorstellung*) is the signifying element filling out the vacant place of the missing representation (*Repräsentanz*)—which is the depiction of Lenin himself (Lenin in Warsaw). The Imaginary visual is juxtaposed with a missing object that is recalled by the title. Here we have three psychic registers working—the framed Picture itself as the Imaginary, the Symbolic as the linguistic signifiers of the paradoxical title, and then the Real as the absent place of Lenin in Warsaw—the three site/sight/cites.

The field of representation [in German *Vorstellung*] is the field of what can be represented. The problem is that not everything can be depicted (represented). Something has to fall out. The claim that “Lenin must be in Warsaw” and the title take the place of this missing void, of the “originally repressed” representation (*Repräsentanz*). Its very exclusion functions as a positive condition for the emergence of what is being depicted. If Lenin were not in Warsaw, Nadezhda Krupskaya could not be with the young Komsomol member (see image, below)). The content of the picture (as subject—like when we ask what is the subject of the picture), in this case Nadezhda Krupskaya with a young Komsomol member has (again) an object (*a*)—namely, Lenin in Warsaw.
For Lacan, any signifier has the status of a Vorstellungsrepräsentanz—subject to this double representation. No longer a simple Saussurean material representative of the signified, it acts as a substitute filling out a void of some originally missing representation. It does not bring to mind yet more representation rather it brings out the lack of it—i.e. Lenin in Warsaw. It ‘fills’ up, or puts a stop to what is referred to as a ‘hole’ in the Other (Other here refers to the Symbolic order—the field of representational signifiers) so that its appears w(hole). The Vorstellungsrepräsentanz is the pure, reflexive signifier incarnating the lack itself, which then fills out the void of this lost object, like the joke. Magritte was a master at presenting us with titles that recalled the absent object in his images. But as soon as the Vorstellungsrepräsentanz fails to be connected to this hole or lack in the Other [the field of representation], to the falling out of the object, it then simply functions as a ‘title.’ When this happens a title merely limits possibilities of interpretation, the metalinguistic process of becoming entangled in the hermeneutics of figuring out just what the picture “means.” Such analysis can lead to the play of relativism (as multiple interpretations), but the more difficult work would be to try to figure out what makes the fantasy frame appear in the first place.

It is the fantasy of the enframed work of art that provides us with the half-truth of those who maintain that the work stands alone, that it requires no analysis, and so on. But this fantasy structured by the frame is precisely where the lure of the object as object cause (a) of this fantasy resides. It is this unknowable object that holds the various imaginary discourses together to create the reality of the Symbolic order with its hegemonic fantasmal imaginings. Rigor is required to comes to terms with the non-sense signifier that holds the frame together; only in this way can the fantasy be exposed for what it is, what sustains it—why Lenin must be away for Krupskaya to have her fun.
Rigor, from a Lacanian psychoanalytic initiative, becomes a search to deduce what might be the objet a that frames vision. What structures your, a nation's, or an audience's imaginary fantasy of the world, the symbolic reality that is sustained ideologically by the object a? As it is the seat of ideology, the task then becomes to interrogate and question this objet a, this cause of desire—to see whether the fantasy should be ruined, exposed, discarded and transformed because of the consequences of its ethical and political implications.

In the joke our complicit laughter simply affirms the truth of this objet a, that sustains a fantasy of illicit transgression (obscene supplement) by Krupskaya—exposed and made obvious in this case by the signifiers of the title. Perhaps Lenin himself would not have laughed, but then again, he's in Moscow!

References


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In defense of a continued radical politics in visual cultural studies," Journal of Social Theory in Art Education: 104-139.


Notes

1 Most recently the philosophical output of Giorgio Agamben (2005) has developed this state of exemption within the sovereign Law.

2 A second reading reverses the first reading that an image is not represented by its text by focusing on the demonstrative pronoun “this, ” which can only refer referentially to the sentence. Hence, “This” (particular discursive statement) is not the image of a pipe. Lastly, a third reading emerges by doubling the demonstrative pronoun. “This” (referring to the entire image of a pipe as not represented by the discursive signifiers) is not a calligram where image and word come together (like a poem about smoking in the form of a pipe). See Foucault, 1983