

Reflections from a Blind Eye

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"I need to *reflect* on this. I need to see if I can make sense of it."

Derrida's Memoires

In his book, *Truth in Painting*, Derrida has traced Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) in order to pose questions about what art is, about how it can be apprehended and about how it can be evaluated. He concludes that every discourse on art presupposes a discourse on the frame: presupposes a distinction between what is intrinsic to the work of art and what is extrinsic. By identifying a frame which separates what is inside and what is outside, according to Derrida, Kant, by implication, defines not only the frame but also the framing of the frame. This is the *parergon* and over a third of *Truth in Painting* is given over to the examination of this term. Parergon is usually defined as a by-work, a complementary or parallel work, but which as used here might be understood to be a by-product. The parergon, therefore, is concerned with all that is associated with the work of art but not a part of it – just like the frame of a painting. The parergon is associated with the work but secondary to it. At the same time, its significance vacillates since it marks the boundary of the work, identifies the point of difference and draws attention to the limit of the work itself. Although secondary, the frame can cancel, erase the art, be ludicrous, inappropriate, lavish, ornate, minimal. Whatever. The point is that the frame stands in relation to the work. My point here is that, just as theorization holds the theorist in the *trap of insight*, so the frame distorts and sometimes cancels what it circumscribes. It is likewise a trap (Höpfl, 2006). In this context, I am mirroring [speculating] on how the frame functions in the process of reflection: on how reflection and theorization construct the parergon. How, in

turn, such framing removes the construction from its physical context and gives it a metaphysical identity, renders it abstract and gives it definition.

This notion of the parergon has far reaching implications for the nature of the frame, for definition and liminality, since it marks the point of *undecidability* between inside and outside, being both insignificant and secondary and, at the same time, liminal and defining. It defines and yet in defining cancels. This is because the frame, the parergon, restricts, limits and characterises what it contains. It annihilates by reflection. What it constructs around the thing in itself is at variance with the idea that thing can live independently of the frame. Rembrandt's study of the anatomy class shows a group of students framing the dead body which they will begin to dissect in order to understanding the living. Yet the frame distorts the meaning of what it contains and may usurp that meaning to become the very definition of what it contains. In the anatomy class, the study of the dead defines the functions of the living. A student comes to see me. She is seriously ill. She is awaiting the results of tests. It is a matter of life and death. She asks me for an extension to complete her work – and I fill in a form. I enter words which seek to capture the context, to give meaning to her situation, to frame her medical condition. She sits before me contemplating her mortality and I get up and put my arms round her and say simply "*Look after yourself*". This is the relationship between reflection and annihilation. Here, even in the construction of the argument is the inescapable dynamic of power: the power to define and capture.

Resistance is in the touch, in the recovery of the physical.

The Abocular Hypothesis

In 1990 Derrida was invited to curate an exhibition of drawings and paintings for the Louvre. The exhibition, *Les Mémoires d'Aveugles (Memories of the Blind)* sought to explore the boundary between his writing and works of art where the images themselves were constructed as parergonal⁷ to his writings. This exhibition presented a challenge to the conventional relationship between art and text where text is normally parergonal to the image, that is to say, text normally explains and locates the art itself. Here, the intention is to examine the relationship between the subject of reflection and its capture in text; between the subject as apprehended and its objectification via text (see Hopfl, 2006). *Mémoires d'aveugle* deals with blindness, memory and self portraiture. The subtitle for the exhibition was "The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins". In the text of the exhibition, Derrida proposes what he calls the "abocular hypothesis". This notion frames the work, and Derrida gives attention to this concept in *Mémoires's* introductory and concluding sections. The term itself, ab-ocular, carries with it the duality of meaning of *from*, out of the eye and, at the same time, *from*, separated from the eye. However, there is a further meaning at work here since the modern French term *aveugle* (blind) can be traced directly to the Latin *ab-oculis*: something *from the eye*, that is, the eye is less than and nothing from the eye, nothing can be seen. Derrida is talking about his own blindness: metaphorical and literal. Here, this is examined as the blinding effect of reflection, the reflection which dazzles and petrifies.

Ironically, for two weeks during the exhibition Derrida suffered from an eye affliction which left him unable to close his left eye: a physical contradiction to his theoretical excursion. A lot could be said about the meaning of the

abocular hypothesis but, in short, Derrida is arguing that the artist is blind, the object of attention always invisible. It can only be invoked by memory. The artist is blind to the present. He is also saying that drawing/art, like language, requires the play of absence and presence and that this too is invisible. Consequently, the artist always relies on a blindness which cannot be recognised, which is found in the blinding play of absence and presence. He, as artist, cannot see what memory makes him blind to and this blindness becomes the frame for his art. The parergonal image signifies the absence which leads to its presence as framing, as structure, as all that contextualizes and constructs meaning: the inescapable absence of what is "(in)sight [(sa)voir]", (Lacoue Labarthe, 1989: 117).

Some of these ideas are developed in Derrida's *Truth in Painting*. This is a complex book: tantalising and impenetrable. Indeed, Derrida said that its translation is impossible so why bother. Why seek to "capture" the elusive meaning which is always falling away from one's grasp: one's apprehension? However, Derrida is generous in his authorship and always provides the reader with the opportunity to "slip away" from the text. There is always a sense of the formidable intellect, formidable *and compassionate* intellect, which inhabits the text: a text always struggling with the rhetorical thrust of language and with its poetic subversion as an act of writing. There is both a desire for precision and a desire for imprecision, and an awareness of the blindness which produces such insufficiency, such misapprehension. On reading Derrida, every word dances with signification and dazzles and *blinds* like the mirrored shield Perseus holds up to the Gorgon. This is his [Derrida's] cancellation in which he captures the reader in "the trap of (in)sight [(sa)voir]", (Lacoue Labarthe, 1989: 117). What then is the residuum of reflection? What moves between subject and object, between subject and objectification: between animated and mortified?

⁷ Outside the frame, outside the work.

Reflections

“Contemplation and the moral reflection of the past not only preserve it as living reality, but elevate it to a higher level of life. Similarly, *entoptic*⁸ [italics added] phenomena do not fade from mirror to mirror, but are, by the very repetition, intensified” (Goethe, *vide* Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989: 165).

The Latin word for mirror is *speculum* and usually refers to polished metal which can be looked at [from *specio*⁹]. This is a term which is well known in contemporary uses in a variety of forms. From the surgical instrument, the *speculum*, used for gynaecological examination to the everyday use of words such as *speculator*, *spectator*, *spectacular* the mirror provides a *fascinating*¹⁰ focus for discussion. To speculate is to observe, to reflect upon, to contemplate, to theorize. Following Lacoue-Labarthe (1989: 209), it is argued here that the process of specularisation is founded on a model of the tragic in which the spectator can only speculate. To look full face into the horror is to be blinded to action, is to be paralyzed by an inability to apprehend the subject, to see too much and to be overwhelmed by vision. Just before 8 pm on Thursday March 27th 2008, an accident occurred on a level crossing near to the university at Hythe Station in Colchester. A young mother of two small children was killed when she was hit by a train.

A tabloid newspaper report of the tragedy said, “Prosecutor David Etherington QC said, “Darren Palmer [the defendant] crossed the

tracks and stood on the Clacton platform when the crossing barriers were down. He became frustrated that Kelly Mack didn’t join him and he lost his temper. As she had failed to come to him he went and grabbed her and dragged her across the tracks and into the path of the train”. Mr Etherington told a jury that moments before the fatal impact student Jonathan Freer-Smith, 18, had managed to free Kelly from the wooden slats. He said, “He went on to the crossing to help Kelly and told her to leave her boot. He got her physically to the London side of the tracks, the safe side, as the danger was coming on the Clacton side. Had things stayed as they were this would have taken her out of the path of the train all together. But the defendant took exception to this and walked back across the rails and snatched her from Mr Freer-Smith’s grasp. The court heard Kelly was three times the drink drive alcohol limit and was on a cocktail of methadone and four types of Valium drugs. Palmer who sat in the dock wearing a dark grey suit and lilac open necked shirt, denies a charge of manslaughter. The trial, which is expected to last two weeks, continues today” (*The Sun*, January 13th 2009).

When the student was interviewed on television on the day of the accident he was still in shock and his eyes widened and stared as he explained what had happened. It was clear that the horrific, appalling and terrifying scene he had witnessed was still being played out in front of his eyes. He told how the victim had curled herself up into a ball as the train sped towards her. The sight was clearly running cinematically before his eyes. This was sight before insight, sight before theorization. Raw and physical: not yet lessened by reflection, intensified by repetition.

Slain by Reflection

Lacoue-Labarthe (1989) argues that in the face of the tragic one can only “attempt to circumscribe it theoretically, to put it on stage and theatricalise it in order to try to catch it in the trap of (in)sight [(sa)voir]”, (1989: 117). This observation applies both to the subject matter of the paper, reflection as theorization

⁸ OED, relating to the appearance of the different internal structures of the eye; hence **entoptics**

⁹ OED, [L. *speculum*, f. *specere* to look (at), observe. So F. *spéculum*, It. *speculo*, *specolo*, Sp. *espéculum*.]

¹⁰ OED, **1. trans.** To affect by witchcraft or magic; to bewitch, enchant, lay under a spell.

and to theorization as reflection –and operates in the “trap of (in) sight” where theorisation reveals that the “only remedy against representation, infinitely precarious, dangerous, and unstable (is) representation itself” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989: 117). Although this idea sounds complicated, it deals with the object viewed in the line of sight and the object viewed via specularisation, that is to say in this context, as the object of reflection. Lacoue-Labarthes is saying that when the object is elevated to the status of *subject of speculation*, it is mortified by *insight*. The observer is petrified by the sight of the monstrosity. Lacoue-Labarthes’ analysis suggests that the object of the speculation is mortified by that speculation: annihilated by reflection. As in the story of Medusa slain by her own reflection.

What this means, despite the labyrinthine language, is that theorization kills. The subject is destroyed via reflection. The subject is killed via the elevation of monstrosity into a mere mirage (from the French *mirer* meaning to be reflected, to look at oneself in a mirror), mere reflection and this reflection is fatal. All life is drained from the subject and yet the fruits of reflection are highly prized: the acquisition of abstraction. This move in theoretical terms functions in the same way. The mortification of the subject is a supreme achievement. This is what Lacoue Labarthes means by “the trap of insight”. In practice, what is mortified is alterity and, as Coates observes, frequently this is a feminine alterity which, as Kristeva says (is the) “other” without a name”, (Kristeva 1982: 58). By a tidy ordering of experience, by reduction to simple constructions and by a profound desire to annihilate *the other*, reflection detaches the person from the experience.

There are interesting implications to be carried forward from these ideas. When Derrida’s argument regarding the blindness of the artist is carried over to the analysis of reflection and speculation developed earlier, it is possible to develop a proposition *regarding* the work of the theorist to that of Derrida’s artist. In other

words, to be caught in the *trap of insight* whereby this essay, as theorization, becomes trapped in its own aboculism; reflecting mirror to mirror like an endless play of light and insight. However, this is not simply a matter of comparing the theorist to the artist, or saying that speculation and reflection work with a similar dynamic. Rather, it is to point to the same blindness. Neither theorist nor artist can see their subject matter at the time they come to address it. Both share an ab-ocular vision. The construction of the work, of the representation, of the theory, is what permits the disposal of the flesh. The flesh as the disordered other is what petrifies. Better than the formulation, the imago, the appeal of the metaphysical. Unless they are regarded fully, and I mean this in the literal sense of the term *regard*, that is *to look upon, gaze, observe*, the defining power of such constructions is not seen, a blind eye is turned to the subject, the power of alterity is annihilated.

Blinded

The idea of being blinded by reflection and the story of Medusa is developed elsewhere (vide Höpfl, 2008). However, it is useful *to reflect* on this particular framing. When Perseus hold up the mirror to the Medusa, when he holds up his shining shield, she is slain by her own reflection, blinded by reflection, cannot see. The mirror as the speculum which offers this reflection, forces back on the perpetrator and victim the images which appear in the reflection. When Perseus holds up a mirror to the Gorgon he confronts her with his “reality” and she is paralysed by that reflection. It is not surprising that by the sixteenth century the slaying of Medusa was held up as a motif of the conquest of the senses by reason. What Medusa reflects back to Perseus is his own construction, a monstrous power, and what she reflects back to herself is mortification. If, in more general terms, this blindness permits the person who must gaze into the speculum to be converted to the logos, then they will be able to demonstrate their conversion to order, to the power of the frame. The order of the framing will prevail over the disorder of the content. Sanity as the logic and order of what

is clean, clear, classified, well structured becomes synonymous with the absence of ambivalence. The frame blinds as a “misleading pretext” (Hoad, 1986: 43) by its trajectory and closure. It jealously guards its blinding: la jalousie. To be blind is to be caught “in the trap of (in)sight [(sa)voir]” Lacoue-Labarthe (1989: 117). Seen in this way, the therapeutic quest of the organisation is concerned with framing but the consequences of this are the paralysing effects of blindness, a loss of sight, loss of sa-voir. The organization believes in its sightlessness that it is all-seeing. The pantopticon is paradoxically a product of blindness. The problem is, of course, that is impossible to know how to begin to *reflect* on these issues (*vide* Irigaray, 1985). In privileging constructions over physicality, the organisation comes to reproduce itself in theoretical articulations – as paradigms and matrices - and to understand itself in metaphysical terms as the product of its own reproduction. Within this logic, the organisation seeks to reassure itself of its power over monstrosity, over alterity.

Drawing the Blind

Well, of course, the notion of Drawing the Blind follows on from Derrida’s notion of abocular vision but there are other theorists who have given attention to blindness, reflection and other matters related to sight and insight; to visibility and invisibility. Notable amongst these is perhaps Walter Benjamin who has also explored the story of Perseus and the Gorgon albeit with a different intent. Merleau Ponty, Paul de Man, Paul Virilio and, of course, Derrida have all had a fascination with sight and blindness. It seems that there is something about the blinding radiance of insight which appears to function as a pharmakon to cure disorder through theorisation and to create frames and structures which destroy through representation. Such theorisation creates distance, the distance between subject and objectification, and chasms into which, blinded by definition and clarity, it is possible to fall, afflicted by blindness, to fall into separation.

Into the loss of physicality – abstract and eyeless. So what of the notion of drawing? Well, there is the obvious association with drafting or drawing, sketching. Derrida’s *Memoires of the Blind* is a text which accompanies his exhibition at the Louvre of photographs of blind people. In the book, he *draws out* the meaning of “to draw” and considers the relationship between subject and objectification. But there is also present the meaning of the Latin verb *trahere* meaning to draw or to drag. This is a complex word which goes deep into the structures of language, *trahere* for example, becomes *tract* as in *tract* of land, *contract*, *trade*, *tread*, but also *drag*, *tragen*, *traction*, *contraction*, *attraction*, *protraction*, *retraction*, *detract* and so on. It relates to a movement across a space and is characterised by the markings it leaves behind. An extraction is something drawn out by force, dragged from one place to another. Consequently, to *draw the blind* beyond its obvious associations has a range of meanings which are about movement across a space and more particularly about a forced movement. Likewise, the blind refers to those who cannot see, who can no longer see, who are blinded by reflection, startled – at the point before therapeutic theorisation begins. The vertigo which is produced by seeing that which is unbearable (*unerträglich*) will destroy. It will destroy *me* and I can’t look, I can’t look. I am like Lot’s wife warned by the angel not to look back on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah but tempted to look back to see.

Derrida draws the blind and it is simultaneously an act of concealment, which draws attention to seclusion to a withdrawal from the analytical gaze of the other and at the same time a revelation of the condition of blindness – physical and metaphysical. For Derrida, the artist is blind, the object of attention always invisible, can only be invoked by memory: the artist cannot see what memory makes him/her blind to. Derrida is dealing with the elision between revelation and concealment, between believing and seeing; between believing one sees and catching a glimpse of, of seeing between (the blinds) and, of course, the self portrait too as an act of

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revelation and concealment which becomes something of the relationship between autobiography and parody, between self presentation and representation. Put simply, we come to believe in the construction of ourselves as an externality with occasional revelations about an internality over which we draw a blind, as we lose sight of ourselves, as we become a mere mirage produced by reflection, become caught up in a process of reflection which renders the concept more attractive than the person.

Reflections

It is not possible in this short essay to do more than outline some of the relationships between *Blindness and Insight* (de Man, 1971), between blindness and reflection (Lutz, 1999), between blindness and memory (Derrida, 1990), between reflection and annihilation, (Lacoue Larbarthe, 1989) although clearly all play a part in this theorisation; this construction. The trap of insight applies to the essay itself which succumbs to its own vertiginous fall. It too, redolent with reflection, is blind to its own construction and cannot see what it has lost to memory, to the body, to flesh. It is after all, mere abstraction: a mirage of meaning parading its loss. It is therapeutic writing which seeks struggle with this loss. In the end, it is a comment on the valorisation of reflection and a caveat about the defining power of illumination and insight.

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