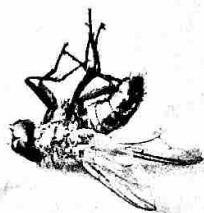


The Return of the Real

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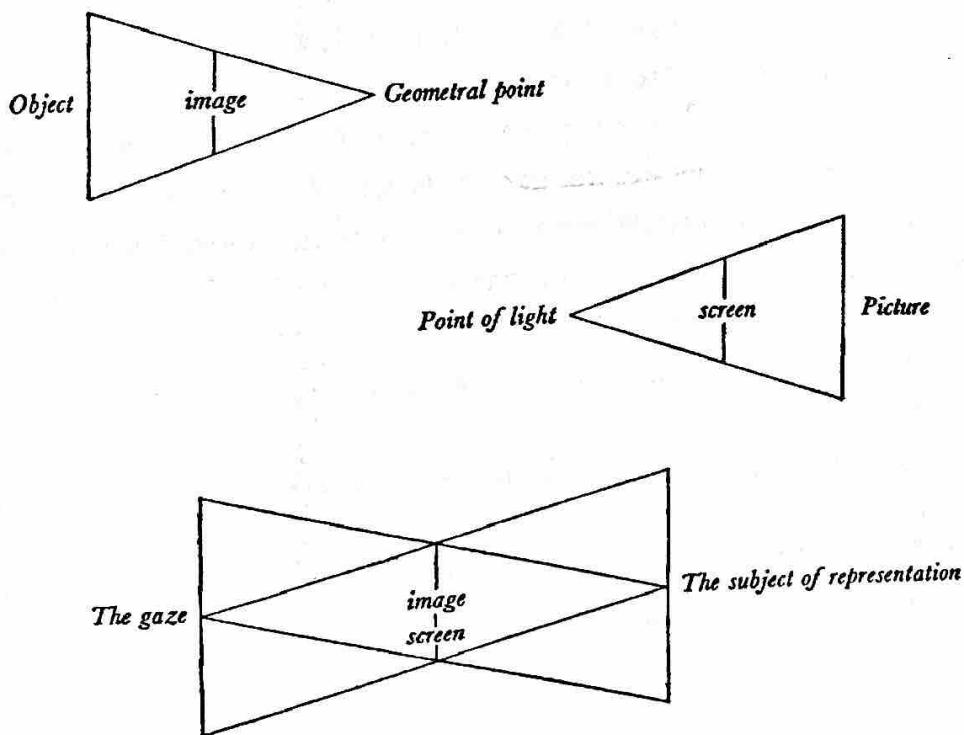


Roughly contemporaneous with the spread of pop and the rise of surrealism, the Lacan seminar on the gaze follows the seminar on the real; it is much cited but little understood. There may be a male gaze, and capitalist spectacle is oriented to a masculinist subject, but such arguments are not supported by *this* seminar of Lacan, for whom the gaze is not embodied in a subject, at least not in the first instance. To an extent like Jean-Paul Sartre, Lacan distinguishes between the look (or the eye) and the gaze, and to an extent like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he locates this gaze *in the world*.³¹ As with language in Lacan, then, so with the gaze: it *preexists* the subject, who, “looked at from all sides,” is but a “stain” in “the spectacle of the world” (72, 75). Thus positioned, the subject tends to feel the gaze as a threat, as if it queried him or her; and so it is, according to Lacan, that “the gaze, *qua objet a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration” (77).

More than Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, then, Lacan challenges the old privilege of the subject in sight and self-consciousness (the *I see myself seeing myself* that grounds the phenomenological subject) as well as the old mastery of the subject in representation (“this *belong to me* aspect of representations, so

reminiscent of property," that empowers the Cartesian subject [81]). Lacan mortifies this subject in the famous anecdote of the sardine can that, afloat on the sea and aglint in the sun, seems to look at the young Lacan in the fishing boat "at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated" (95). Thus seen as (s)he sees, pictured as (s)he pictures, the Lacanian subject is fixed in a double position, and this leads Lacan to superimpose on the usual cone of vision that emanates from the subject another cone that emanates *from the object*, at the point of light, which he calls the gaze.

The first cone is familiar from Renaissance treatises on perspective: the subject is addressed as the master of the object arrayed and focused as an image for him or her positioned at a geometral point of viewing. But, Lacan adds immediately, "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture" (96).³² That is, the subject is also under the regard of the object, photographed by its light, pictured by its gaze: thus the superimposition of the two cones, with the object also at the point of the light (the gaze), the subject also at the point of the picture, and the image also in line with the screen.



The meaning of this last term is obscure. I understand it to refer to the cultural reserve of which each image is one instance. Call it the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture, this screen *mediates* the object-gaze for the subject, but it also *protects* the subject from this object-gaze. That is, it captures the gaze, "pulsatile, dazzling and spread out" (89), and *tames* it in an image.³³ This last formulation is crucial. For Lacan animals are caught in the gaze of the world; they are only on display there. Humans are not so reduced to this "imaginary capture" (103), for we have access to the symbolic—in this case to the screen as the site of picture making and viewing, where we can manipulate and moderate the gaze. "Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze," Lacan states. "The screen is here the locus of mediation" (107). In this way the screen allows the subject, at the point of the picture, to behold the object, at the point of light. Otherwise it would be impossible, for to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real.

Thus, even as the gaze may trap the subject, the subject may tame the gaze. This is the function of the screen: to negotiate a *laying down* of the gaze as in a laying down of a weapon. Note the atavistic tropes of preying and taming, battling and negotiating; both gaze and subject are given strange agencies, and they are positioned in paranoid ways.³⁴ Indeed, Lacan imagines the gaze not only as maleficent but as violent, a force that can arrest, even kill, if it is not disarmed first.³⁵ Thus, when urgent, picture making is apotropaic: its gestures arrest this arresting of the gaze before the fact. When "Apollonian" (101), picture making is placating: its perfections pacify the gaze, "relax" the viewer from its grip (this Nietzschean term again projects the gaze as Dionysian, full of desire and death). Such is aesthetic contemplation according to Lacan: some art may attempt a *trompe-l'oeil*, a tricking of the eye, but all art aspires to a *dompte-regard*, a taming of the gaze.

Below I will suggest that some contemporary work refuses this age-old mandate to pacify the gaze, to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real. *It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition.*

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To this end it moves not only to attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn. For the moment, however, I want to remain with the categories of *trompe-l'oeil* and *dompte-regard*, for some post-pop art develops illusionist trickings and tamings in ways that are distinct from realism not only in the old referential sense but in the traumatic sense outlined above.³⁶

In his seminar on the gaze Lacan retells the classical tale of the *trompe-l'oeil* contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Zeuxis paints grapes in a way that lures birds, but Parrhasios paints a veil in a way that deceives Zeuxis, who asks to see what lies behind the veil and concedes the contest in embarrassment. For Lacan the story concerns the difference between the imaginary captures of lured animal and deceived human. Verisimilitude may have little to do with either capture: what looks like grapes to one species may not to another; the important thing is the appropriate sign for each. More significant here, the animal is lured in relation to the surface, whereas the human is deceived in relation to *what lies behind*. And behind the picture, for Lacan, is the gaze, the object, the real, with which "the painter as creator . . . sets up a dialogue" (112-13). Thus a perfect illusion is not possible, and, even if it were possible it would not answer the question of the real, which always remains, behind and beyond, to lure us. This is so because the real cannot be represented; indeed, it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter, a lost object (the little bit of the subject lost to the subject, the *objet a*). "This other thing [behind the picture and beyond the pleasure principle] is the *petit a*, around which there revolves a combat of which *trompe-l'oeil* is the soul" (112).