

The Voice and the Gaze as 'objet petit a'

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Abstract

Repression of the Real is a function of the coming-into-being of the Symbolic Order. That which is repressed resurfaces in the Symbolic, thereby threatening its order. What resurfaces is the non-repressible remainder, an excess that can neither be conceptualized nor can be eliminated. This remainder of the Real is what Lacan refers to as objet petit a or simply objet a. Objet is French for object, petit is French for small, and a is the first letter in the French autre, meaning other. In casual English translation, therefore, the objet a is essentially the small other. For Lacan, the objet a is a signifier of the Real that is lost in the process of symbolic constitution of the subject which resurfaces in the Symbolic Order. Its name is a misnomer in that it is not an object at all. It is rather a non-object because what is originally lost is nothing—the original loss or the lost object is only a retroactive construction. And it is this loss that becomes the cause of desire, precisely because of the fact as a loss/lack it provides the necessary immaterial basis for desire—we desire what we have lost or currently lack. In other words, objet a is the object-cause of desire. It is equivalent of the partial object in Freud. Freud speaks of three partial objects—namely, breasts, faeces, and phallus; in Lacan, we find two more—namely, the voice and the gaze. This paper examines the voice and the gaze as objet a in Lacan.

Keywords: objet a, repression, the gaze, Lacanian Real, partial object.

1. Introduction

Laura Mulvey is accredited with coining the term, 'the male gaze', in her 1975 article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in which she makes political use of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical frameworks to unmask the deep-seated patriarchy informing the production and reception of mainstream Hollywood films. What is male gaze? Commonly understood, if the ogling subject happens to be the camera—of course, the object ogled at has to be woman, without exception—then the ogling act would be referred to as the male gaze. That is, when the camera ogles at the woman on behalf of the man, or when women are eroticized for the sexual pleasures of men, what is at work is the male gaze. Does Mulvey use the term in this sense? No. Her use of the term gaze is Lacanian, and although she adds the qualifier 'male' to it, she is still making her claim from a fairly Lacanian framework. The qualifier only reinforces the inherently male or masculine disposition of the structure governing the economy of desire. In Lacan, the voice and the gaze are the object-cause of desire, which he adds to Freud's list of partial objects—breasts, faeces, and phallus. An object cause of desire is not an object. It is a non-object, a pure lack that is necessary for a subject to exist, survive, and thrive as a desiring subject. The object-cause of desire emerges out of a filtering-out process that brings about the symbolic order that

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we co-inherit and co-inhabit. The voice and the gaze are the excess remainders of the filtering-out process, and as such belong 'originally' to the Lacanian Real. This paper tries to map out the contours of these two non-objects, an understanding of which is crucial to make sense of Mulvey's essay.

2. The Voice

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida demonstrates that traditional metaphysics is a metaphysics of presence and is oblivious of the fact that every presence contains in itself the trace of an absence, of that which it (the presence) is not. Metaphysical notions rely on and disseminate binaries—presence/absence, male/female, light/dark, interior/exterior, presence/representation, speech/writing, signified/signifier, etc.—such that each pair has a privileged term to which the other term is subordinated, which is defined/understood vis-à-vis the privileged one. Saussure's linguistics inherits the binary, oppositional grid from traditional metaphysics and upholds the primacy of speech over writing. In Saussure, speech enjoys a privileged status as compared to writing because of its structural proximity to logos—the thing-in-itself directly corresponds to the image-in-mind, which is represented to the self via voice/speech. Nothing affirms the presence of oneself to one's self as intimately as voice or speech. The affirmation is unmediated. One only needs to hear oneself speak to be certain of one's presence—this certainty is self-ascertained and self-contained, independent of the need for an external frame of reference. Now, in the auto-affection or self-presence precipitated by the act of hearing one's own voice, one can read structural resemblance with what Lacan indicates about the mirror stage in an infant's life. The infant (mis)recognizes itself in an alterity (mirror image, which is located outside the body of the infant and splits the infant at the moment of its egoistic recognition). Similar narcissistic operation is at work in the recognition of one's self in one's voice-image. But once we take that route, voice begins to appear as the very thing that denies the subject its self-presence. How? Such a voice would refer to an alterity in the core of one's being, just as the self-recognition propelled by recognition of oneself in one's mirror image introduces a split in the subject. Subjectivity becomes mediated at once.

It may here be pointed out that though logocentrism and phonocentrism perhaps seem to be closely tied to each other, that is not so and that the historical and metaphysical attitude to voice has been anything but ambivalent (Dolar 2006: 52). While it is true that the history of metaphysics has upheld the primacy of voice over writing because the former brings one closer to the presence that guarantees all sense, what is equally true is that pure voice—voice independent of textual anchorage and decoupled from signifiers, or wordless voice, if you will—has been viewed as insidious to logos and always threatening to disrupt order. This attitude of ambivalence towards voice has always been there and is not a novelty that Lacan introduced ex nihilo. Even when Saussure assigned a privileged status to sounds and speech and classified the written text as subservient to the spoken language—the written text merely stands in for the spoken language and as such is exterior to language per se—he was aware of the exteriority of the voice:

Saussure himself was torn between two opposing tendencies: the one that prolonged the traditional stance and made him condemn writing as secondary to voice, but threatening to "usurp the principal role" (Saussure 1998, p. 25), and on the other hand his insight that "the essence of a language...has nothing to do with the phonic nature of the linguistic sign" (p. 7). (Dolar 2006: 38)

As a matter of fact, it is Saussure's phonological enterprise which demonstrates that language is a system of differences in which meaning is produced because of differences among irreducible linguistic units called phonemes, a system in which voice features only as an extraneous remainder. One encounters this residual voice again in Lacan's graph of desire. This residue is not to be confused with "the accent, the intonation, and the timbre"—the three modes in which we experience the voice (Dolar 2006: 20). Assuming that voice is not the essence of signifiers and that its inherently extra-linguistic, why should that make voice a disruptive force that needs to be domesticated and that cannot be left unattended? Because in the absence of signifiers, voice-in-itself becomes equivocal. The voice in itself has no meaning in particular and, by inference, could stand in for both one thing and its contradictory concurrently—the residual voice disobeys and dismisses the law of contradiction. Once the law of contradiction is relinquished, the symbolic structure which governs intersubjective existence falls apart. The centre can no more hold. Uncertainty, instability, and infirmity become the order of the day. Any and every authority is undermined. Decoupled from the signifying chain, voice could point to both God and the Devil, so to speak:

...does music come from God or from the Devil? For what is beyond the word announces both the supreme elevation and the vilest damnation. What raises our souls to God makes God ambiguous; beyond the Word, we cannot tell God from the Devil. (Dolar 2006: 50).

The senseless, the signifier-less, the wordless voice is thus recalcitrant to logos, but then it is recalcitrant to itself too. Its identity, if I may use the term, rests on internally constitutive contradictions—God and the Devil, the feminine and the masculine. Music detached from words and thereby inherently ambiguous has been looked upon as feminine, effeminate, and womanly:

In one of the oldest...texts about music, the Chinese emperor Chun (c. 2200 BC) offers the following simple precept: "Let the music follow the sense of the words. Keep it simple and ingenuous. One must condemn pretentious music which is devoid of sense and effeminate"...music, and in particular the voice, should not stray away from words which endow it with sense; as soon as it departs from its textual anchorage, the voice becomes senseless and threatening—all the more so because of its seductive and intoxicating powers. Furthermore, the voice beyond sense is self-evidently equated with femininity, whereas the text, the instance of signification, is in this simple paradigm opposition on the side of masculinity. (Some four thousand years later, Wagner will write in a famous letter to Liszt: "Die Musik ist ein Weib," music is a woman.) (Dolar 2006: 43)

Having said that, there is a contrary aspect of the voice—it is the voice of God which reinforces logos instead of opposing it. It is the voice of the law which commands obedience and adherence. Mladen Dolar quotes from Freud's *Totem and Taboo* to explain the role that the shofar plays in Jewish rituals. Its prolonged sound unconnected to any linguistic signifiers signify the voice of

God. The sound of the shofar epitomizes the voice of the law and its commanding authority. The law in its pure form just commands—it does not command anything in particular. This non-specific law empty of content is what the meaningless sound of the shofar signifies. Therefore, the pure voice can be both masculine and feminine and can reinforce or reject logos. The question that arises here is whether the masculine voice is qualitatively different from the feminine voice. In other words, are these two different kinds of voices? The answer perhaps lies in that this difference, this otherness that separates the two voices is internally constitutive of the voice and is not based on an exteriority. It is structurally similar to the regulative centre of a circle, which is nonexistent but is nonetheless necessary for the circle's form.

The voice is thus extralinguistic—it does not belong to language. It is that which ties language to the body. Then, does it belong to the body? Can the body be assumed as the source of the voice? The only reason why we associate the voice with a body is because the body seems to provide the spatial ground from which the voice seems to emanate. If I were to pinpoint the spatial coordinates for a voice, I would provide the coordinates of the body. However, technological inventions have clearly divorced the voice from the body—think of the voice produced by sound systems and telephonic devices. These devices have exposed the once dominant mythical necessity of spatio-temporal proximity of the voice and the body. I can hear the voice of a person who is located miles away from me and even years after his or her death. Having said that, the modern audio devices only surface what has always been the case but waiting to be realized. Ventriloquism is the art of projecting an external object as the source of the voice—it consists in dislocating and relocating the voice at a site other than the origin. However, if one probes a little, one realizes that *normal* speaking in itself is an act of ventriloquism—if that were not the case, ventriloquism the way it is understood would be unimaginable. What makes possible the detachment of the voice from its supposed site of origin in the first place is its inherent detachability from the body. If the voice belonged to the body, then its separation from the body would be impossible. The argument will cease to sound ridiculous as soon as one remembers those occasions on which one, having met a person with whom one had only spoken before on the phone, thought that the voice and the person did not go together, even though it was the same person one has had conversations before. It is only after one has grown accustomed to the person that the veil of familiarity normalizes the connection between the once disjoint body and voice. The similar is the case with audio devices, too—it is our long exposure to telephones, tape recorders, speakers, and all kinds of audio systems that has exorcised the alien-ness of the initial encounter. Following Michel Chion, Mladen Dolar calls such a voice the acousmatic voice (Dolar 2006: 60). By definition, the acousmatic voice refers to the voice whose site of engenderment remains unseen. One only hears the voice but cannot attach it to anything in the visible spectrum. It is spectral voice without a visual anchorage. Such a voice commands authority, and the authority dissolves as soon as one pins the voice down to a set of spatial coordinates in the visible domain. To cite an example from contemporary culture, the voice of the fictional Big Brother on the television reality show of the same name commands obedience precisely due to its disembodied-ness, its incorporeality. If embodied, it would turn sightable and would thereby lose its enigmatic, uncanny character—something that is necessary for its commanding position. That we commonly take the body and the appliance as the source of the acousmatic voice is the product of our fetishistic substitution for the invisible and absent origin:

Radio, gramophone, tape-recorder, telephone: with the advent of the new media the acousmatic property of the voice became universal, and hence trivial. They all share their acousmatic nature, and in the early days of their introduction there was no shortage of stories about their uncanny effects, but these gradually waned as they became common, and hence banal. It is true that we cannot see the source of voices there, all we see is some technical appliance from which voices emanate, and in a quid pro quo the gadget then takes the place of the invisible source itself. The invisible absent source is substituted by the gadget which disguises it and starts to act as its unproblematic stand-in. the curious remainder of wonderment is the dog intently inspecting the cylinder of a phonograph... (Dolar 2006: 63)

That I qualified substitution as fetishistic should project the substitution as necessary. It is necessary because what it covers up is an absent origin, thereby bringing back the troubled memories of the castration threat and of the mother's castrated site. Thus, the substitute has been incorporated as the origin, dissipating all uncanniness and perplexity. The only remainder of the perplexity is the image of the dog examining the phonograph which features in the logo of the recording label, HMV (His Master's Voice). The label comes from the title of the British painter, Francis Barraud's painting, *His Master's Voice*. His inspiration for the painting came from the fact that his late brother's dog, Nipper, would curiously listen to the recorded voice of his late master whenever it played on the phonograph. The voice emanating from the machine had therefore clearly deceived the dog. This deception seems similar to the story of the visually deceiving paintings, which Lacan makes use of: Zeuxis and Parrhasios were two rival painters in Greece, who wanted to ascertain which of them is the better artist. To settle the debate, they decided to participate in a contest in which each of them would privately paint a fresco on separate walls. Until the time the paintings were complete, and until the jury had seen the finished paintings, curtains would remain drawn to conceal the products of their individual labor. On the day of the judgment, Zeuxis first opened the curtain to reveal his masterpiece—a perfect still study of fruits in a bowl. The extraordinary realism of the picture deceived the bird who tried to peck at the fruit drawn on the wall. The jury and the audience were impressed. It was now Parrhasios' turn to unveil his painting. But when Zeuxis requested him to draw the curtain from his painting, Parrhasios said that that could not be done. Zeuxis, the jury, and the audience took the refusal as an acceptance of defeat. Yet, Zeuxis insisted that the painting be unveiled, without realizing that the veil itself was the painting. No prizes for guessing who won the contest:

In the classical tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, Zeuxis has the advantage of having made grapes that attracted the birds. The stress is placed not on the fact that these grapes were in any way perfect grapes, but on the fact that even the eye of the birds were taken in by them. This is proved by the fact that his friend Parrhasios triumphs over him from having painted on the wall a veil, a veil so lifelike that Zeuxis, turning toward him, said, *Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it*. By this he showed that what was at issue was certainly deceiving the eye [*tromper l'oeil*]. A triumph of the gaze over the eye. (Lacan 1979: 103)

Both paintings were demonstrations of the artistic technique called *trompe l'oeil*, meaning deception of or deceiving the eye, but there is an important difference between the two. Zeuxis

manages to deceive the animal, whereas Parrhasios manages to deceive the human. In the latter case, the deception is a function of the gaze which takes over the eye. The eye sees the veil, but the gaze is intrigued by what is behind the veil. In other words, the veil triggers the human desire to know the reality that is concealed and what it encounters there is desire itself which falls outside the visible realm. Though the nature of this deception seems similar to the deception at work in the case of the dog who is taken in by his master's voice which is reproduced by the phonograph, there is an important difference between the two. You can turn off the gaze by closing your eyes but the same cannot be accomplished with respect to the voice—ears have no lids which could be used to shun out the voice. Besides, hearing voices with one's eyes wide open at least offers the possibility of locating, however tentatively, the voice in an exteriority. But even this bare minimum bargain is denied to one whose eyes are closed—one is now all the more uncertain whether the voices one hears have their origin within or without. One is always already at a distance, no matter what the magnitude be, from the visible world. With the voice, however, the distance becomes unstable and unsure—it is inherently impossible to pin the voice down to a *here* or a *there*. If one intends to safely distance oneself from the voice, one must take recourse to the visible. That is, one must associate the voice to a visible body. Thus, the operative logic of the sight seems to be contrary to the operative logic of hearing vis-à-vis distance. However, the distance that is firmly established by the logic of sight vanishes the moment one draws the Lacanian distinction between the gaze and the look (seeing, in the common\normal sense of the term). In the Lacanian theory of the gaze, the gaze is incorporated in the object from which it emanates, which is in contradistinction to the eye which projects out from the position of the subject. The gaze is that point in the object from which the object looks at the subject (us). Like the *veiled painting\reality* of Parrhasios, the gaze falls outside the scope of what can be seen. It is that excess in the object which is more than the object and forever escapes symbolization. The gaze is that which obliterates the distance between the subject and the object:

...if the logic of vision seems opposed to the logic of audition, if the visible appears to be on the side of distance and stability, then Lacan's theory of the gaze as an object aims precisely at dissipating this spontaneous illusion, at collapsing this distance of the eye from what is seen, this exception of the spectator from the picture. "The scission of the eye and the gaze," as the section dealing with the gaze is called in *Seminar XI*, means precisely that the gaze is the point where the distance crumbles, where the gaze is itself inscribed into the picture, as the point where the image "regards" us, looks back at us (Lacan 1979, pp. 95 f.). (Dolar 2006: 79)

In the light of this, we see that the questions that we earlier asked of the voice can be asked with equal merit of the gaze, and that the problems that the voice poses to any attempt at formulating a totalizing theory of the voice are posed by the gaze, too. The acousmatic voice has authority—it wields a certain power over the listener. It is seductive and influential. The moment one listens to the voice, one is already in a state of obedience and adherence, even if one disagrees with and defies the voice subsequently. As Dolar says, "listening entails obeying" (Dolar 2006: 75) etymologically. To put it differently, listening is always already obeying. Subsequent disobedience does not change this equation at all. On the contrary, it only reinforces the connection, since disobeying implies not listening. But this influence that the voice has over the other is only part of the picture. At the precise moment the voice has a hold over the listener does it also yield to

the other. One is exposed at the very moment the voice is produced—by voicing one's thoughts, one loses semantic control over what was solely one's own and becomes a mere participant in the intersubjective discourse. The outside which was kept at bay until that point now becomes an interposing force, thereby modifying the interior. What is at stake here is the mutually distinct identities—the interior and the exterior. The interior becomes exteriorized and the exterior interiorized, therefore precipitating a topological paradox. One encounters this precise paradox in the non-seeable field of the gaze as well.

3. The Gaze

The gaze is one of the most difficult concepts/notions in Lacan. Lacan elaborated his theory of the gaze in Seminar XI, which was published under the title, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. We noted earlier that the voice emerges as an unwanted and unnecessary appendix in linguistics according to which semantics is an effect produced by the differential operation to which language as a system of signification is subject to. The gaze has a similar status within Lacanian analysis—it is a non-conceptualizable excess. Moreover, while the eyes operate on the side of the *I* of ego, the gaze operates on the side of the *object* (the Other). Of course, this is something that one encounters in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* itself, when Sartre provides a phenomenological description of the annihilating gaze of the other to which one is submitted.

3.1. The Gaze in Sartre

According to Sartre, the gaze that one encounters in the intersubjective field is experienced as an existential threat. The statement is in need of at least two-fold clarification. We should be able to answer the questions: 1) Is the manner in which another human being is accessible to me (Sartrean *being-for-itself*) in my perception qualitatively different from the manner in which an inanimate object (Sartrean *being-in-itself*) is available to me in my perception? Asked differently, is the other human being a being-in-itself or a being-for-itself? 2) What exactly is meant by *existential threat*? As a being-for-itself, I am the subject of my experience. Which means that anything and everything that is perceptible to me by default constitutes an object of my experience. I am a consciousness. But a consciousness is necessarily of something—there is no such thing as *pure consciousness* which is empty of any content whatsoever. Even if there is one, it cannot be experienced. For a consciousness to experience itself, it must have an other posited to it as its object. This is the intentionality of consciousness. It is always directed at or is about something. Of course, it can turn its focus on itself—for example, it is possible that I reflect on myself performing an act—but even then the reflecting-I and the reflected-I are qualitatively distinct. The reflecting-I is the consciousness that has as its object the reflected-I. In this structural manifestation, we see the subject-object dichotomy. Given this mode in which objects from the world are necessarily available to me, the quality of what I experience changes when the object of my experience is another human being. Unlike with other (inanimate) objects, I experience the human being as both an object of my consciousness and yet one who is irreducible to the status of an inanimate object. As Sartre observes, the human being that I see, who is given to me as an object of my consciousness, is capable of organizing the world around himself or herself in a way that is

structurally analogous to the way in which I, as a consciousness, form the basis of providing a structural organization of things in the world around me. In other words, this animate other is revealed to my consciousness, at the precise moment when I have objectified it by simply becoming interested in him or her, as an alternative basis of organizing the world, thereby delimiting my subjective function and autonomy. In Sartre's words:

This green turns toward the Other a face which escapes me. I apprehend the relation of the green to the Other as an objective relation, but I can not apprehend the green as it appears to the Other. Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible flight and fixed in the direction of a new object. The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting. (Sartre 1966: 255)

This other, unlike his/her inanimate counterparts, spontaneously appears to me as a challenge to my authority. As soon as this other appears in my conscious field, I am displaced from the privileged position of being the guiding centre of the world to one amongst its innumerable centres. The possibility subsequently follows that just as this other, which by his/her mere existence in my field of vision (of perception, in general) displaces me from the centre, is revealed to me as an object of my experience, I could in turn be revealed to this other as an object of his/her experience. Thus, not only has my centrality been undermined, but I am also reduced to a mere object—subjected to the process of objectification, if you will—that the other could experience, thereby further undermining my subject-position in the process. I therefore realize that I too am reducible to an object. But what kind of object? Is this the inanimate being-in-itself? The answer is perhaps no. That is because just as the appearance of a being-for-itself on the horizon of my experience has an undermining effect on my authority, I must have a similar decentering effect on this other being-for-itself. This reciprocity obtains only between and amongst *beings-for-themselves*. So, what is it that differentiates me (or, any other being-for-itself for that matter) as an object of another's experience and an inanimate object? I earlier said that the gaze of the other annihilates me. To annihilate is to reduce to nothing, literally. Therein lies the existential threat. This threat is not to be read as a physical threat—the phenomenon is much deeper than that. And this Sartre explains with an example. Suppose you are taking a stroll in a park. You look around and see different kinds of objects—a children's swing, the blue sky, the green grass, a bench, etc. On the bench is an emaciated old man reading a book. His poor physical condition, along with your distance from him, completely neutralize any physical threat that he might pose to you. Further suppose that, for some unknown reason, you find his figure against the background interesting and you fix your look on him. Then, all of a sudden, the old man, who until now was engrossed in his reading, looks up from his book and glances back at you. At the very moment when your glances exchange, something terrible awakens inside you. You feel unsettled. As a result, you cannot return the glance for long and look away. In this exchange of glances, what you encounter is the other's gaze and you experience yourself as a nothingness. One encounters a similar notion of the gaze in Levinas' "Face of the Other", as Rudolph Bernet observes in his essay 'The Phenomenon of the Gaze in Merleau-Ponty and Lacan'. According to Bernet, this commanding and nullifying gaze of the other is not because of any ontological or

physical superiority attributable to the other but rather because of the fact that what I see in the other is a reflection of my own nothingness. The other commands not through power but through lack of it. It must be noted that the gaze of the other is not to be confused with the eyes—the eyes belong to the realm of the visible but the gaze by its nature belongs to the realm of the invisible. The eyes/*I* carry out an operation of covering up the gaze—they constitute the veneer overlying nothing. The veneer comes off, exposing the nullity underneath, in the function of the gaze. In Bernet's words:

The gaze of the Other thus truly accomplishes a phenomenological reduction of vision since it leads the perception of worldly objects back to the invisible gaze which dwells in the Other and perhaps even in things. (Bernet 1999: 109)

3.2. The Gaze in Merleau-Ponty

In Sartre (and in Levinas), we thus see a chiasmic structure at work as regards the gaze, which crudely speaking is manifested in the following fashion—I see the other, and the other returns the gaze. *Chiasm*, whose adjectival derivative is *chiasmic*, comes from the literary technique *chiasmus*, which incorporates a sort of reversibility. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty holds that the seeable and the non-seeable are chiasmically linked to each other. In other words, the visible flows into the invisible and vice versa. He provides the topological analogy of a glove in which the inside-outside of a finger parallels how what can be seen and what cannot be seen are interlaced with each other. Though the invisible cannot be seen (which explains why it is invisible), that does not reduce existence to the visible domain—one can be sure of the invisible as the other side of the visible without ever seeing it (the invisible) just as one can be certain of the other side of a gloved finger by looking at just one side. Merleau-Ponty defines the chiasm/reversibility as:

...the chiasm, reversibility, is the idea that every perception is doubled with a counter-perception (Kant's real opposition), is an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens. Speaking-listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived circularity (it is because of it that it seems to us that perception form itself *in the things themselves*)—*Activity=passivity*. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 264ff)

This is similar to Kantian antinomies, which teach us that the nature of existence is essentially antinomial and that it does not make sense to ask, for example, whether we inhabit a deterministic world or a world in which free will asserts itself. Kant's resolution to this antinomy is that the world is not only simultaneously deterministic and free, but also that it is deterministic because free and free because deterministic. In other words, determinism is a function of free will just as free will a function of determinism. One does not exist without the other and rather provides the support required to the other, and vice versa. To better grasp what Merleau-Ponty says about the reversible circularity of seeing and being-seen, let us shift our focus temporarily to the tactile perception. What happens when I touch an exteriority, be it animate or inanimate? I feel the tangible dimension of the world through my touch—of course, I may get a similar feeling if I touch any part of my body but let us consider the case of the inanimate object for the moment to encounter the raw absurdity of the claim in order only to dissolve it. It is true that I, as a human agent endowed with the tactile sensory organ, am capable of bringing myself in physical contact

with an object in the world around me and the contact enables me to thereby develop a tactile idea of what the object has to offer in terms of texture and shape. But in the precise moment when I touch the object, am I not in turn touched by the object and furthermore do I not become aware (yet again) of my own corporeality, of my own existence as a tangible amongst countless other tangibles? Now, in the specific case of touching one's own self, is there a qualitative difference between it and touching an exteriority? To rephrase the question, is not my tactile access to my own body also available to me in the same fashion? In such an act, is not my own body offered to me as an exteriority? Which extends from my own body into the infinite space beyond, incorporating into its field objective continuity and connectivity, a continuity that is constituted through objects? To lend the question the rawness that it deserves, do I ever touch myself other than as an exteriority, or isn't my inside always outside my touch/reach? This inside of the touch is the untouchable that is necessarily presupposed by all things tactile. The untouchable dimension of my existence provides the (im)materiality necessary to support my being along the touchable dimension. As a result, the picture of the world emerges as one in which the outside and the inside begin to appear as the illusory correlates of a Moebius strip-like surface. One can of course read it in terms of the (Lacanian) subject's insurmountable enterprise to find itself through re-discovering the lost plenitude in things acquired after the loss—the only way backward is the way forward, which manifests itself in repetitive patterns, where the repetition is precipitated by the disappointment inherent in the enterprise. One is always already decentered and located at an alien point, as a consequence of which whatever efforts one makes at resituating oneself at the centre—reclaiming the centre—only displaces one further from one's source. But though meaning may have been irreparably lost, one does not give up on it altogether; rather one doggedly pursues it, in peace and in commotion, in one's symbolic-ridden organization. For Merleau-Ponty, this tactile continuity-in-circularity is mirrored in the case of the vision and beyond. The seeing and the being-seen are two inseparable modes of experience in the visual dimension, both of which are supported by the dimension of the invisible. Furthermore, there is a certain necessary interdependency of the visual and the tactile in him—what has extension (what's touchable) is visible and what is visible has extension (therefore, touchable). Thus, one is given in the other, and the other in one. But how tenable is this proposition? Visual illusions are a case in (counter)point. Holograms are visible and are extended in space, but we cannot touch them. To answer this, we need to bear in mind that in Merleau-Ponty the visual and the tactile are not merely interdependent—they seem to bear in themselves a quality that renders them inherently transgressive. In other words, the two senses, visual and touch, distinct in themselves and in the objects that they are directed at (*intentionality*), seem to incorporate the possibility of a mutual crossover, disregarding their territorial boundaries. Otherwise, how do we account for the use of tactile metaphors (*the texture* of what is offered to the vision) in describing what seems to pertain exclusively to the visual? It is almost as if the visual sense-perception *touches* (Merleau-Ponty uses the expression, *palpates*, which means to examine through touch) its object. The phenomenologist is of course aware of the conceptual difficulties or inconvenience caused as one moves from grasping the unity of the touching and the touched to that of the seeing and the seen:

The look...envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them, it moves in its own way with its abrupt and imperious style, and yet the views taken are not

desultory—I do not look at a chaos, but at things—so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command. What is this prepossession of the visible, this art of interrogating it according to its own wishes, this inspired exegesis? We would perhaps find the answer in the tactile palpation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which, after all, the palpation of the eye is a remarkable variant. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 133)

But he insists that we need to sensitize ourselves to and train ourselves in a transgressional way of thinking and experience the world of vision and of touch, and what we need to unlearn in the process is that the two sensory domains are excluded from each other through their territorial circumscriptions. Two significant implications that arise as a result of one's acceptance of this sensory transgression are that just as one is a part in the world of things accessible to touch and by playing one's part one ensures its tactile continuity so is one a visible amongst the countless visible things that collectively lend visual continuity to the world and that just as to touch is to be at the same touched, to see simultaneously is to be seen. Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that in the light of the intertwining of the visual and the tangible as well as the individual and the world what emerges is a picture of fundamental narcissism in which one not only sees itself in the outside but is also seen by the outside. But to what are attributable the visibility, the tangibility, and the visibility-in-tangibility of the world? Is it a property of the sum of things that make up the world, visually and tangibly? In his final analysis, Merleau-Ponty cites the non-empirical, phenomenological "flesh of the world" as the causal basis underlying the world of things in which one finds himself or herself. In Lacan's words:

For him [Merleau-Ponty], it is a question of restoring...the way by which, not from the body, but from something he calls the flesh of the world, the original point of vision was able to emerge. (Lacan 1979: 81ff)

3.3. The Gaze in Lacan

In 'A Pound of Flesh – Lacan's Reading of *The Visible and the Invisible*', Charles Shepherdson reads in this phenomenological foundation of vision a symbolic foundation of the gaze and therein lies the point at which Lacan seems to depart from Merleau-Ponty, for Lacan does not regard the gaze as a function of the symbolic. For him, the gaze is rather a manifestation of the Real within the visual field in the symbolic register. Shepherdson argues that when a subject is submitted to the gaze of the other, it recovers the lost maternal closure, precisely through identification with the object-lack, thereby losing desire, even if temporarily. But, according to Lacan, a subject exists in the symbolic register only as a desiring subject. So, in the moment of temporary identification, the subject loses its subjectivity (by trading its constitutive lack for closure). However, we have not yet gone over all the necessary premises that warrant such a conclusion. Instead of rushing to adopt this conclusion, let us spend a little more time in narrowing down our grasp on the distinction between the eye and the gaze in Lacan, and once we have traversed this route the foretold conclusion should begin to emerge as the logical effect of our laborious investment. In particular, we must invest ourselves in making sense of what Lacan means when he speaks of picture as a function "in which the subject has to map himself as such" (Lacan 1979: 100). He also

asserts that “in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture” (Lacan 1979: 106), that “what determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside” (Lacan 1979: 106), and that “the gaze is the instrument” through which “I am photo-graphed” (Lacan 1979: 106). It might seem that Lacan is talking about the metaphysical distinction between being and representation here, but he is aware of such a (mis)reading and immediately distances himself from it—“What is at issue here is not the philosophical problem of representation” (Lacan 1979: 106). What Lacan is proposing on the contrary is a chasm within the being itself, which is the precondition of intersubjectivity. The function of the chasm, the absolute nothingness at the core of the being, is to isolate being and non-being within being itself, such that the non-being is the masquerade that forms the basis of an interpersonal, intersubjective exchange between human beings. What disambiguates the human from the animal is that while the animal is completely taken in by this masquerade, the human though held captive by it is nonetheless aware of an excess that lies beyond it. Revisiting the example of the two painters—Zeuxis and Parrhasios—should illuminate the point. The bird which flies straight into the painting on the wall, taking the fruits painted for actual fruits, the veil painted on the wall succeeds in deceiving the human eye, the deception thus bearing evidence to the fact that the human is never completely taken in by the image and is always intrigued by a beyond of the veil—the gaze. As long as the human mind is intrigued by this beyond of the veil, the gaze is operant which ceases to operate, much in the manner of the *Arago phenomenon*, as soon as the eyes notice the veiled artifice.

In *The Origin of Perspective*, Hubert Damisch describes a demonstration of one-point perspective that creates an illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, as conducted by one of the pioneering figures of Italian Renaissance, Filippo Brunelleschi, in the early years of the fifteenth century. The demonstration included a panel painting, which Brunelleschi had himself made and which is now inextant, of the baptistry and the piazza of the Cathedral of Florence as seen from a point on the door of the cathedral. The demonstration consisted of the following: Brunelleschi had made a hole in the wooden panel of the painting such that the hole corresponded to the pinhole on the door of the baptistry; the painting was placed facing the scene painted in it at that point in space from which it was made; the viewer was required to peep through the hole made in the wooden panel and as he/she peeped through the hole, he/she was to hold a mirror in front of the painting (and between the painting and the actual scene) in order to see the painting proportionately reflected (with some effort, undoubtedly) on to the surface of the mirror. When the mirror reflection coincided with the painting, it produced the illusion that the content reflected in the mirror extended out from its boundaries, suturing the chasm within being between being and representation, as it were. This is so because precisely when the painting is respectively reflected on the mirror that the reflection achieves perspectival harmony with the actual scene behind it. It is important to repeat the question that Thomas Brockelman asks in connection with this demonstration in his article ‘Missing the Point – Reading the Lacanian Subject through Perspective’—if the purpose of the demonstration was only to show how a pictorial representation whose creation is geometrically aligned to the rules of one-point perspectival optics, when appropriately placed, seems to extend out from and merge into the scene that it is to represent, then the same effect could have been accomplished by strategically superposing the painting over the scene represented in it and all the more easily so because the second case would

not require the setting up of the apparatus that positioned (and through such a positioning transformed) the viewer as a voyeur. Then, what is gained in the demonstration as it took place as opposed to its strategic and easy alternative? Or, should one ask—is anything at all gained because of the sophistication involved? As Brockelman puts it, “why not look *at* the painting instead of *through* it?” (Brockelman 2008: 19). Damisch and by way of him Brockelman respond to the question with an affirmation. Apart from the magic that the one-point perspective can conjure up, what the experiment demonstrates is the interdependency between the subject position and an object (represented or presented) in space. The key here is the effort that needs to be made by the viewer for him or her to see the pictorial representation properly reflected on the mirror. The viewer is not a passive recipient in the demonstration. How well (or not) he or she positions the mirror in front of the painting determines how well (or not) the painting is reflected in it, anamorphically conjoining the subject of representation and the representation in a single act of seeing-and-being-seen, as it were. The representation thus becomes exclusive to his or her vantage point. In Brockelman’s words:

...it is a representation *for* a viewer, and to the extent of a viewer. You picture ‘your’ self in picturing where you are in relationship to the painted scene... (Brockelman 2008: 20)

Brunelleschi’s demonstration, therefore, establishes the chiasmic structuration of seeing and being-seen. By re-producing (through reflection) the vanishing point behind the hole on the panel behind the reflecting surface of the mirror on a line that runs perpendicularly between the holes (on the panel and reflected), the experiment also relegates the gaze to the outside of the visual/visible field. The anamorphic link between subjectivity and representation is clearly underlined by Lacan in his theorization of the gaze using the painting, *The Ambassadors*, to illustrate his point. The painting is the dual portrait of two royal ambassadors against a background that reeks of their affluence. It is an almost perfect depiction but for an anamorphic object—a visual distortion—at the bottom of its frame. The distortion moves from nonsense to sense as the viewer situates and re-situates himself or herself (much like the “jockeying” with the mirror in the demonstration) until the visual distortion starts looking like a skull painted for viewing from a skewed angle, wherein the viewer is incorporated into the painting. Moreover, the near-perfect painting with a glaring distortion at its centre may also be read as the return of the Real in the Symbolic, whereby its consistency is threatened. In other words, or in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, this distortion-in-perfection is the object returning the gaze of the spectator, of the human subject.

4. Concluding remarks

In a final comment, let us consider the thought experiment that Etienne Bonnot de Condillac conducts (textually, by way of tracing down the experiment to its logical extremes) in his work, *Traite des sensations* (English translation, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*), in which he attempts to provide an account of the origin of the gaze. At the centre of his experiment is a statue which is like the human figure in all aspects, except for the fact that the statue has no senses at its moment of birth, so to speak, and to which senses are endowed subsequently, one after another. At first, the statue is given the olfactory sense. Then, if a rose is introduced to it, it smells

it. From the point of view of a human subject, the statue at this point would be one that smells the flower. But considered in itself, independent of any external frame of reference, the statue at the moment of sensing the fragrance of rose is constitutionally nothing other than the fragrance itself. This is because the statue is still in a pre-ego state and it is yet to acquire a sense of ego. Then, each of the remaining four senses is sequentially inaugurated in the statue such that the sense of touch is induced at the very last. That means, at a certain subsequent point, the statue can smell fragrances, see what can be seen, hear sounds, and taste food. But even at this point it cannot be said that the statue now has an ego. In other words, the statue is still an unseparated and indistinct part of an amorphous continuity in matter. To state things clearly, the statue is what it smells, hears, sees, and tastes. The division between interiority and exteriority has not yet set in (and this more plausibly explains why the voice cannot be situated at any point in space; the moment space enters the scene, one can be sure that the senses have been adulterated), and which can be set in only through the induction of the tactile sense. To speak particularly of vision, before it acquires the sense of touch, seeing and looking/gazing are coincident with each other in the statue, and the two operations are divorced with the institution of touch. Touch is the sense-perception that establishes the dimension of space, as a result of which distance is established between the statue and the objects sensed by it, thereby founding the ego-object dichotomy and engendering subjectivity in the statue. As a result of this divorcing function of touch, the coincidence between seeing and looking ceases to exist and the two visual operations are relegated to the two opposite poles of the dichotomy:

Now the touch has to teach it how to look, that is, to make it conceive the consciousness of what it sees as a consciousness of something other than itself, of something which is "exterior," which "is seen" outside. The statue, being at first nothing but a part of a net composed of rays and sparkling colors, now emerges as an eye, as the *organ* of sense. The organ replaces and "expels" the gaze, and this "minimal operation" makes the statue see as we do: from now on the statue, as all the other mortals, *has eyes in order not to see*. (Zupancic 1996: 43)

The thought experiment, thus, proves handy in accounting for the origins of the gaze, as it were. However, in every effort to uncover origins, one must see at work, following Lacan, the repetition mechanism that is obsessed in re-finding the lost object and the correlative impossibility of such an undertaking because any story about the origins is always already manifold removed from the point it purports to aim at.

Endnotes

ⁱ According to resources on the Internet, the Arago phenomenon alludes to the paradoxical effect of things appearing clearer to the peripheral vision than to the central vision. The effect was first observed by the French astronomer and physicist Dominique Francois Jean Arago. The phenomenon is named after him.

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