

The Restlessness of the Imaginary

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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2019

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Psychoanalysis has always been based on the eclipse of the visual and on the primacy of speech: this is evident in any clinical experience where the patient lies on the couch and never looks the psychoanalyst in his/her eyes. The work of Jacques Lacan though, is strangely full of references to the visual field and to images: from the text on the “mirror stage” in the Forties to the elaboration of the visual dimension of *objet petit a* (gaze) in the Sixties. As a consequence, a long tradition of film studies made reference to Lacan and used psychoanalysis as a tool in order to explain the inclusion of the subject of the unconscious in the experience of vision. What is less known is how the late Lacanian reflection on the topic of analytic formalization opened up a further dimension of the visual that goes beyond the subjective experience of vision: not in the direction of a mystical ineffable (the Real-as-impossible) but rather toward a subtractive mathematization of space, as in non-Euclidean geometries. The outcome sounds paradoxical but it can have major impacts on the way we understand the visual field and we represent it in visual studies: sometimes abstract formalization can help us to look at the space even better than with our eyes.

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Introduction

It is common in Lacanian Studies it is common to say that Jacques Lacan's reflections on the visual field are contained in two seminars of the mid-Sixties: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* of 1964 and *L'objet de la psychanalyse* of 1965-66. However if we take into account the entirety of his teaching, his reflections on the visual experience looks significantly different then if we limit our reflections only to his explicit references to the visual experience. Before introducing Lacan's conceptualization of the *object-gaze* – which is commonly considered the most innovative meditation Lacan developed on the topic of vision and also the most explicit one in his teaching – it is necessary to make a *detour* into what was until the Sixties the dominant interpretation regarding the visual field in Lacanian psychoanalysis, i.e. the visual as *imaginary*. This intermediate step is necessary in order to underline how the visual was for years in Lacan the constitutive principle of *reality* in its phenomenological given to the experience of an individual. It is only with seminar of 1964 that Lacan made an audacious U-turn through which the visual becomes the bearer of – what is almost the opposite principle -: an emergence of a dimension *irreducible* to both reality and to the mediation of the subject of cognition. The gap that separates *reality* and the *real* is redoubled within the visual field: on one hand the visual field is the cornerstone of the

consistency of reality, as *imaginary*, on the other hand it is an element which is *irreducible* to this very reality, as *object-gaze*.

Visual Field and Reality: The Imaginary

When Lacan develops the concept of the *imaginary* we are in the first phase of his teaching. We are in the years of the so-called Lacanian structuralism where the dimension of the causality of the signifying chain is at the forefront in the analysis of the formations of the unconscious. Contrary to a psychoanalytic doxa that considered the unconscious an archive of passed and repressed experiences which belongs to the dimension of the profound and of the irrational – to what in the subject eludes any rational grasp – Lacan rather defines the unconscious rather as a *logic* deployed on a surface: a subject is constituted *in* language and *by* language. Beneath the level of communication that would aim at reducing the signifiers to an instrumental denotation of objects of reality, there is a bizarre and arbitrary logic: signifiers are ambiguous, they are connected through opaque homophonies, strange connections and double entendre. Having to deal with language, even for the most banal communicational purposes means, for Lacan, to be inhabited by an inevitable dimension of enigma.

The subject of unconscious desire does not concern the biological or bodily instincts that the project of civilization is not able to repress, but is rather constituted in a

space of linguistic uncertainty where the meaning of a signifier is ambiguous and opens up the room for questions such as: what do these words mean? What did I mean to say with these words? When someone speaks, it is never clear to her at first which signifiers specifically will be uttered. Proof of that is the fact that when we write we keep re-reading what we have just written, or when we talk we keep trying to better explain what we meant. It is as if through our own words we would keep interrogating the nature of our desire more than verifying the successful adequation with an intention that pre-exists language. Lacan affirms that a subject *is spoken* by language more than using language to speak. Nevertheless this inevitable enigma arising from every speech act and regarding one's own desire would engender a paralysis if it were not momentarily and locally converted in the certitude of a successful communication of the *imaginary*. Whereas signifier is constituted in an ineliminable difference, an image shapes a certitude of unity. Lacan in this phase of his teaching locates the register of the symbolic in the signifying difference – also defined as “that which is always *other than itself*” – while the register pertaining to the visual lies in the presumed plenitude of the One of the signified, that which *cannot be other what it is*. Lacan here believes that the image is the quintessential form of mystification and erasure of the signifying difference, which is the true source of the formations of the unconscious.

In this dialectic between imaginary and symbolic, between unity and difference, where the image is reduced to the narcissistic consistency hiding the *being-other-than-*

itself of the symbolic, we found the main part of the tradition of the Lacanian film studies of the late Sixties and early Seventies. From Jean-Louis Baudry to Christian Metz, from Jean-Louis Comolli to Laura Mulvey, Lacanian-influenced film theory hegemonized the theoretical debate within film studies from the pages of *Cinéthique*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Screen*, focusing almost exclusively on Lacan's thought of the Fifties and missing completely the shift occurred in his teaching in the mid-Sixties with the emergence of the concept of the object-gaze. But this was not a theoretical oversight: Lacan's teaching of the Sixties will be published and systematized only after several years. Metz and Baudry, who developed some of the most original applications of Lacan's thought in cinema, referred almost exclusively to the *Écrits*, the only official publication that became available in 1966 but collected texts that were for the most part written in the Fifties. It is only with the seminar entitled *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* in 1964 (published in France in 1973) that Lacan will develop a systematic discourse on the visual field in the register of the Real, even though in order to see the consequences within the film studies it would be necessary to await the works of Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek appearing at the end of the Eighties and the early Nineties.

Visual Field and the Real: The Object-Gaze

“What does it mean to look at an image” Lacan implicitly asks in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*? For the common sense looking at an image is believed to be the connection between a perceiving agent and a perceived object; between an active pole and a passive pole. Such a description of the visual experience according to which perception is none other than an arrow connecting two points in a neutral and abstract space is not far from the implicit (crude) empiricism which haunts film theory even today. Every time that we look at an image don’t we tacitly suppose that we are all looking at the same object? When a film is considered to be an empirical object, don’t we assume that with negligible margin of difference we are all pretty much undergoing the same experience when we watch it?

Lacan organizes his argument on the *object-gaze* in two steps. First, he questions the implicit objectivity of the image with a phenomenological assumption: contrary to the common sense, when we look at an image we all at minimum have a *different* experience. Not only because the conditions of perception are always different - as any scientist of perception or cognitive science would easily prove – but also because we are always looking with a body. And a body, psychoanalysts claims, is first and foremost a *libidinal* body, an enjoying body. A psychotic suffering from visual hallucinations would look at a completely different image, but even the symptoms of any neurotic would define the visual field according to always singular elements. Every subject of the

unconscious thus negotiates a libidinal equilibrium with reality in a singular way, and therefore even the experience of the visual field cannot but be heavily singularized.

Lacan nevertheless clarifies that it is not a matter of a supposed normality of the visual perception subsequently deviated and disoriented by the intrusion of the unconscious. The *object-gaze* is not a subjective disturbance of an otherwise objective and universalizable image. It is not a matter of a relativism of perception. The image that is looked at, is always necessarily *impure*: not only because it is singularized by a subject of desire, but also because the object-gaze is inscribed in the *entirety* of the visual field, and therefore even in the object of perception itself. Image for Lacan is not a thing with its own permanence and substance. Images are not similar to empirical objects that are approached by subjects who – because of the intrusion of the unconscious – cannot transcend their own desiring singularity. The *object-gaze* concerns the subjects of vision as much as the images that are looked at. It is a cut that traverses the entire structure of the visible.

Lacan then makes a second and crucial step in order to bring the theory of the *object-gaze* beyond any risks of subjectivism and toward a proper materialist outcome. The object-gaze does not regard only the relationship between subjects of vision and images/objects: it rather concerns in a much more fundamental way the real of the visual field itself. Lacan here supposes that there is a dimension of the visual that is not reducible to the connection between two points but that rather traverses the entirety of

the space overcoming the figures of activity and passivity to which the model of the geometric optics seems to be condemned. Against a concept of vision organized by the transitive verbs – and that prescribes pairs of relations connecting subjects and objects, active polarity and passive polarity etc. – it is necessary to conceptualize an *intransitive* vision, as it was hypothesized by Deleuze in *Logic of Sense*. According to Deleuze, in an intransitive model of vision, object would look without anything where this vision would lead to. It would be a vision overcoming the duality of passivity and activity, but rather folded into itself: a topological vision of the *real*, like an eye looking at itself (or, as in the famous Freudian formulation, a mouth kissing itself). Nevertheless in order not to be stuck in suggestive but merely literary formulations, it is necessary to bring this dimension of the vision toward a more rigorous materialist option.

The Realism of the Gaze

We tend to think that the act of looking starts from an eye. There is never an impersonal act of looking, there always has to be *someone* who looks. Vision must always be incarnated in an organ that activates it. Or in other words, vision cannot be separated from *perception*. But is it really so? Must vision always be related to an experience (and therefore related to the mediation of a perceiving subject)? And in fact it might seem that even the most abstract formalization of space cannot but emerge from *a single point*,

therefore not differently than from an eye. Even a formalization trying to combine a multiplicity of point of view would not be able to go beyond a point-based model of the eye, and therefore of experience. And even if we suppose that we were able to put together the totality of points of view of a certain space, we wouldn't be able to question the point-like model of visualization (it would only be the sum of many eyes, or even the sum of all possible eyes). So, is vision always doomed to be conceptualized as a vision of an eye? Looking means always looking from a *point* of view, like the movie camera?

Here we touch the core of the Lacanian reflection on the visible. The fundamental passage is a formulation of Seminar XI where the principle of the split between the eye and the gaze appears. Lacan claims that the eye looks but that there is something in vision that cannot be *expressed* by the singularity of the *point* (of view). *The object-gaze indicates that there is something that despite fully belonging to the dimension of the visual, cannot be visualized*: object-gaze is the name for the separation between the visual field and the *visualization* of the visual field).

Many Lacanians saw in this problem one of the definitions of the *real* as impossible: a mobile and unsubstantial limit that cannot be trespassed in the symbolization of the visual field: the real would be the unknowable (invisible), and it could only be experienced through extreme situations. However, the Lacanian hypothesis of a register of vision that despite remaining in the visual field, is not reducible to the imaginary forces us to take a further step.

Starting from the mid-eighteenth century in fact, the visual field *has been* formalized regardless of the spatial intuition of visualization. It was the time of non-Euclidean geometries where the research on the intellectual properties of space took the path of mathematization and abandoned the path of intuition. A group of mathematicians (Gauss, Riemann, Lobatchevsky) managed to *see* space with 4,5,6,n dimensions without passing through the eyes, but only through mathematics. Considering non-Euclidean geometries an experiment in a formalization of the visual field beyond intuition has many consequences. First of all, it is a formalization of a *real* that is indifferent to phenomenical appearances, but nevertheless is not left to a negative formulation (such as the real-as-impossible). The objectivity of this *real* does not have anything of the phenomenological appearance of an empirical object (or of the correlation between a subject and an object as understood in empirical terms), but it can nonetheless be treated in rational and formal way. It is an objectivity that is not linked to any adequation to an empirical data but has to be considered as a conquest and as a task.

The Real of Cinema

What conclusions can we draw regarding cinema from a reflection of that kind on the realism of the Lacanian gaze? Deleuze affirmed that cinema is, more than anything, a technical device: it permits looking without using one's own eyes. Instead of

using our visual organs, we let a machine do it for us through a process of recording light waves by means of a light-sensitive material through a mechanical eye. Between the point of view of the individual narcissistic Ego closed in its own imaginary visualization and the Ego of the movie camera, a gap is opened up: and it is in that precise space – opened up by the collision between these two Egos – that cinema makes the emergence of a gaze possible; in the impossible superimposition and in the dialectical tension between these two points (and not, as many Lacanians believe in the apparition of the gaze on the screen). Paraphrasing Freud we could say that cinema wounds the appropriative narcissistic Ego of visual arts optics. Cinema is not able to formalize the visual field beyond visualization as mathematics does, but it is nonetheless one of the most powerful machines in order to produce anxiety in the given conditions of the visual. That means first and foremost to consider cinema, not as an example of a formation of the unconscious (not a psychoanalysis of films), but as an *act*: an act that would not circumscribe the *real* as impossible (to be seen) but that would rather take a first step in the direction of its possible construction/formalization, an act that would operate – if it is capable – a rupture of the imaginary visual field and would leave the Ego of vision in the anxiety of what could be the *real* of the visual field beyond our own eyes.

1. The Restlessness of the Visual

1.1 *The Imaginary as One*

It is well known – and this was clear already in Freud – how it is impossible to separate psychoanalysis from language and speech. At least in the beginning of its history, the so-called “talking cure”, according to the fortunate definition of Anna O., achieved its therapeutic successes primarily through acts of verbalization. It is interesting to note that for the study of the causes (etiology) of neuroses, “the pathogen is not the trauma itself (for example, having seen a dog drinking from a glass would have provoked an intense disgust), but the very impossibility to verbalize such disgust. The symptom takes the place of this verbalization and disappears when the subject is able to verbalize what afflicted her (Chemama and Vandermersch, 2009, 531). Speech becomes a means through which the subject is able to cure her symptoms.

This is why it was essential for psychoanalysis from the very beginning to develop a theory of language that could describe what happens when an act of verbalization occurs, even though it was only with Lacan that this reflection reached a high degree of sophistication thanks to the contribution of structural linguistics. The famous Lacanian argument of the unconscious structured like a language utilizes the contribution of structural linguistics in order to affirm a crucial feature of the

unconscious, impossible to overestimate: the fact that the *unconscious is synchronic and structural*. This argument goes against a very wide-spread representation of the unconscious – still popular today in pop representations of psychoanalysis – as an archeological storage of traumatic events buried deep down our memory. According to this idea past traumatic events can resurface in the realm of consciousness only in the form of a return of the (symptomatic) repressed

But what does it mean that the unconscious is synchronous and it is always in the present tense? It means that its concept does not refer so much to the other side of consciousness (which would allegedly be in a *specific* place, just a bit more hidden) but to the function of speech in the field of language. The unconscious is not in the depth of the profundity of the subject but is effectively “out there”, as Slavoj Žižek likes to say quoting X-Files (Žižek 1997): on the surface. It is in this sense that the unconscious is *in* language: its only place of manifestation is in the speech, in the gaps – which are repeated at every enunciation – between what I say and what I mean (or, to put it in structuralism terms: between the place of enunciation and the enunciated content). As if the intention of what I want to say, my attempt at signification, is replaced by another will, that of the signifier itself, which Lacan designated with the expression “the Desire of the Other”. But what does it mean that there is another intention which belongs to the Other and not to the subject, and which speaks instead of me (it literally speaks *inside* my words)?

For instance, when a person (and there is a reason why this should not be called at this point subject nor individual) wants to say something to someone else in our everyday communication, she must do it in the form of an articulation of signifiers: i.e. she must “use” the available signifiers that are given to her by the linguistic code that she decides to use (for example, in this case, by the English language). This person thus pronounces a series of signifiers along what is called the “syntagmatic axis of a sentence”. But here immediately a problem arises. These signifiers are inevitably caught in a series of homophonies, ambiguities, double entendres: what the person says can’t never be completely deprived of uncertainties because the signifiers are in a relationship of opposition and connection with all the other signifiers of that linguistic code (the so-called paradigmatic axis). The fundamental hypothesis of psychoanalysis is that all these other signifiers inevitably end up being present even *in absentia*: their shadow looms over the enunciated utterance independently from the intentions of the speaker who may or may not want to pronounce them. The person who speaks picks up some signifiers on the paradigmatic axis of the sentence and she leaves some others apart (for example between different synonymous), but even the ones that are discarded still have a strange form of presence that is connected to their signifying or acoustic proximity. There are multiple effects of meaning that can arise from the same signifying articulation. A single sentence can mean many different things.

In his famous reconstruction of the role of writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Derrida emphasizes how the word *pharmakon* that Socrates uses to define writing – and which would indicate the ambiguity of the Platonic attitude toward writing, given it means “poison” but also “medicine” – is a variant of the paradigmatic series *pharmakeia-pharmakon-pharmakeus*.

Certain forces of association unite –at diverse distances, with different strengths and according to disparate paths – the words “actually present” in a discourse with all the other words in the lexical system, whether or not they appear as “words”, that is, as relative verbal unites in such discourse. They communicate with the totality of the lexicon through their syntactic play and at least through the subunits that compose what we call a word. For example, *pharmakon* is already in communication with all the words from the same family, with all the significations constructed out of the same root, and these communications do not stop there. The textual chain we must set back in place is thus no longer simply “internal” to Plato's lexicon (Derrida 1981, 129-130).

A signifying articulation, no matter how limited, will never be *de*-limited: it cannot be confined. From the chain *pharmakeia-pharmakon-pharmakeus* – notes Derrida in his analysis of the Platonic text – there is a word that remains repressed, which is *pharmakos* (that means “sorcerer”, “magician”, “poisoner”), that is expelled like a scapegoat (which is incidentally also one of its meaning). The Platonic text has to relate – no matter how virtually, indirectly or laterally – with all the other signifiers that are part of that linguistic system, and therefore *pharmakos* ends up being present even in its absence (it is present as an erasure on the syntagmatic axis of a virtuality of the paradigmatic axis). This forgetfulness, more or less intentional or conscious, is also meant to purify the ambiguity that is already present in the *pharmakeia-pharmakon-*

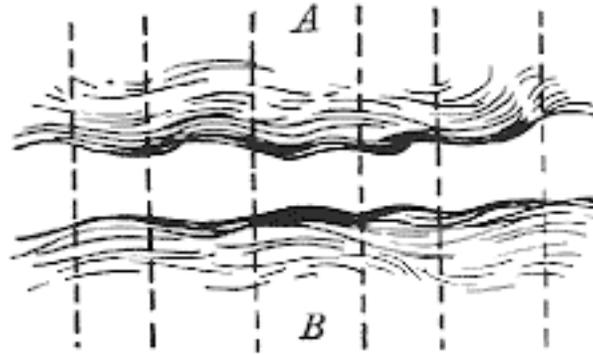
pharmakeus series where different opposite meanings coexist: and Derrida develops a very perspicuous analysis of the whole problematic of the “mixed” words in Plato. In other words, a signifier evokes all its possible virtual meanings (and given the width of the semantic field of a single word, it can even have opposite meanings) but also all the words of a neighboring semantic field that were not used, or even all the words that were phonetically close.

This sort of linguistic unconscious which is *inside* the field of language, is something that has always been present in the discipline of psychoanalytic from the very beginning: it was already noted by Freud, who in a letter to Ferenczi, on October 22nd 1909 (Freud 1993, 84-86), wrote that he became very interested in the work of German philologist Karl Abel, dating back twenty years before, on *The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words* (Freud 1957, 155-161). In this text Abel demonstrates that in the ancient Egyptian language – and later on also in many other modern languages – there were words which were used with antithetical meaning. Freud, who in his analysis of dreams found out that negation did not exist in the unconscious and that the same image could affirm and deny at the same time, saw in this reflection a confirmation of his own theses about psychoanalysis.

The attempt to purify the ambiguity of the signifier – which is intrinsic to every speech act, even at a lower degree of ambiguity than in the Platonic example of the *pharmakon* – is something that always happens in everyday communication. Ultimately

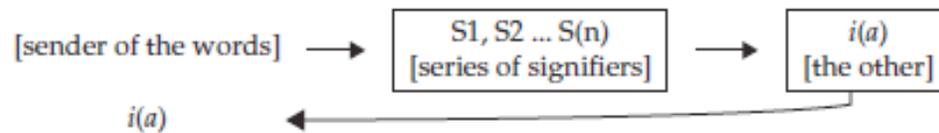
the discipline of semiotics is an attempt to study and to give transparency to the multiplicity of enunciative strategies in order to minimize or eliminate any residual ambiguity (for example taking into account the role of non-verbal communication, para-texts etc.). Every act of inter-subjective communication is an attempt to silence this ambiguity of the signifier and to make it disappear so that the communication between two individuals could occur without ambiguity.

But let's go back to the previous example. When a person utters a series of signifiers with the intention of exposing an idea, a thought or even just the description of a concrete occurrence, it is inevitable that there would be a certain degree of ambiguity *even to the speaker herself*. Philosophy of language has extensively shown how a thought cannot pre-exist (or cannot be said to be fully formed before) its linguistic expression: the intention of the speaker herself – what she meant to say or the content of her thought – cannot but be a bundle of indistinct flows before the speech act (as suggested by the famous Saussurian image where the confused stream of thoughts are cut by the signifying act, as in de Saussure 2011)



It is only when the enunciation has already taken place that, *après-coup*, the content of the thought (i.e. the intention of the speaker) will have been expressed. A person thus utters a series of signifiers, and only afterwards tries to recognize her own intention looking at them from outside. It is only in the act of looking at them that she can ask herself: was this really the intention that was underlying my words? Was this really what I wanted to say?

How is it therefore possible to turn this doubt into certainty? How is it possible to expel the ambiguity, the polysemy that lies within my words? How is it possible to decide whether *pharmakon* means “poison” or means “medicine”? Psychoanalysis has an answer for this: and it is the other. But not the Big Other of the symbolic, but the small other (of the specular image): the other person – our communicational partner.



It is only through the reaction of the other-that-we-look-in-the-face while we are speaking – or rather, the inter-subjective *image* of the other – that the degree of uncertainty of the articulation of signifiers can morph into the certainty of a successful communication.

In the intersubjective dialectic, a series of signifiers, with all their ambiguity and polysemy, are *sealed* to a successful communication through the reaction of the inter-subjective other: the small *i(a)* when she nods or reacts positively to the series of signifiers that are produced by the speaker it is almost as if she were saying “I understand what you are telling to me” or “what you are telling to me, it makes perfect sense to me”. This gesture – it can be even a simple sign of assent – it signals the successful communication between the two interlocutors (and also the opposite is also true: when communication fails a further specification is necessary: “this is not what I meant/ this is not what I wanted to say”). It is interesting to note though, that this transition from the ambiguity of the signifier to a successful and sound signification has *a retro-effect on the speaker himself. For Lacan the primary purpose of communication is not so much that of passing a content from one person to another as that of enabling, après-coup, the speaker to be identified with the content of her own thoughts* (according to the logic of private

property): of enabling the speaker to finally recognize her own intention in the series of signifiers that she just uttered. The properly imaginary (or ideological) effect that is produced is to make sure that the speaker has the impression not only of having uttered a series of signifiers deprived of even the slightest degree of ambiguity, but, even more, that she can put her “signature” under these signifiers and recognize them as products/properties of her own intention. The question – “What do these signifiers that I just uttered effectively mean?” / “Did I really mean to say what I just said?” – is morphed into a “Yes, this is exactly what you wanted to say” / “Yes, these signifiers really belong to you” / “You ARE these signifiers”. Intersubjective communication – which is always imaginary – independently from the content of what is being said, functions as if beneath its infinite variety and differences, what is being said is only and always the same thing: yes, you are these signifiers. You are one with these signifiers.

This effect of the speech – that Derrida will call *logocentrism* and that Althusser in another context will call *ideological* – is the reduction of the *difference* underlying the relation of the subject with the chain of its discourse to the *One*; it is a count-to-One, the transformation of the Freudian *Ichspaltung* in a One. The speaker, by communicating with the small other, suppresses (or sutures) his own division: he becomes a One. He becomes a un-divided, or rather, a un-dividual. To recapitulate, the effects of communication are the following:

1) to suppress the ambiguity of the signifier through an utterance with a univocal meaning, deprived of any ambiguity;

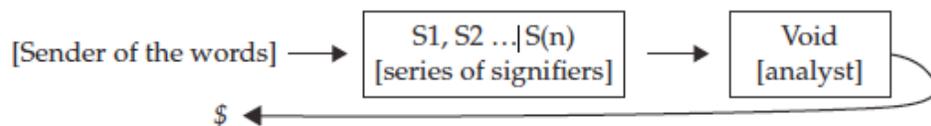
2) to identify the subject (divided by the signifier) with the One of an imaginary signification (erasing the ambiguity that is intrinsic to any signifying articulation);

3) to reduce language to a neutral tool of communication between individuals (which does not produce any new knowledge but it is only an instrument of re-production).¹

It is not a coincidence that the basic operation of psychoanalysis – for example its setting, or the disposition of the bodies in the studio of the analyst – is precisely that of erasing the effect of intersubjective recognition; or of erasing such a *retro-effect* caused by the small other on the signifiers produced by the speaker. The couch – the *dispositif* of subtraction of the series of signifiers that are produced in analysis from the mechanism of intersubjective recognition – serves only one purpose: to make sure that the subject will not have that *moment* of reassurance regarding his identification with his own series of signifiers through the response of the small other. In analysis, the question “Did I really mean to say what I actually just said?”, “What do these signifiers that I just said really mean?” *is not answered*. The ambiguity of the signifier is not sutured by the subjective other. The subject then begins to doubt what she has just said. Between what

¹ According to Althusser, what defines ideology is that it always reproduces things as they are. It does not increase knowledge, it just reproduces things as they are. Only science is a *dispositif* of *production* of knowledge (Althusser 1990).

has been said and what was supposed to be the intention of the utterance, there is a gap: and it is in this space that the experience of analysis takes shape. Doing an analysis means first and foremost to traverse the ambiguity of the signifier.



The individual no longer makes One – it is no more an un-dividual – and what emerges in its place is a *subject* divided by the ambiguity of the signifier (a hystericized subject). Every signifier is now free to enter in productive connection with any other possible virtuality on the paradigmatic axis (homophonies, slips in the same semantic field, for example) and to be open to the question: “What did I mean to say with these signifiers?”. The hystericization of the subject, according to Lacan, is nothing but a *dispositif* to weaken the One of the imaginary closure between the subject and signifying chain of its discourse.

Psychoanalysis is nothing but a continuous process of symbolic de-imaginarization and re-imaginarization – re-imaginarization because every time that the ambiguity of the signifier re-emerges, putting into crisis all forms of imaginary construction, a new interpretative structure (which is, in itself, always imaginary) momentarily resurfaces. “Was this what I meant to say with my signifiers?” “Was this

really the desire that I just expressed with my words (which until now I have never been able to hear)?” The psychoanalyst answers all these questions with a silence,² precisely because a definitive imaginary suture of the ambiguity of the signifier does not exist: or, to put it in more classically Freudian terms, there is no definitive interpretation that can bring the symptomatic expression back to its hidden cause; there is no hidden trauma that could exhaustively explain the return of the repressed.³ The Lacanian psychoanalyst does not interpret (or better, she interprets only in a provisional form, always leaving a blind spot in the interpretation), because she wants to push the analysand always to propose a new interpretation and always to produce new unconscious material.

Why is this reflection on intersubjectivity and communication relevant to understand the register of the imaginary? First of all, because addressing the imaginary in this way can help us to account for its genesis while avoiding the trap of treating the specular register as a mere problem of immediate perception. If we see it from a structural point of view, the imaginary is a *process/operation* of erasure of the difference of the signifier: through the appropriation of one’s own words, we reject the *Ichspaltung* of the signifier. This is particularly relevant when we analyze the visual field because one thus avoid reducing the imaginary to the register of vision and treating the

² At this regard, see Jacques-Alain Miller’s course offered in the academic year 1994/1995 at the Department of Psychoanalysis of the University Paris 8 with the title *Silet* and dedicated to the topic of the *silence* of the analyst (Miller, 1994-1995)

³ This was evident even in Freud when he develops his theory of the primal scene in his commentary of the Wolf-Man (Freud).

reflection of one's own body in the mirror (which was only one of the many examples that Lacan gives of the imaginary register) merely as a visual experience, as it has been done many times in Lacanian Studies. But this is not the case: if the imaginary is linked to perception, it is because it is a "dynamic" or a "generative" perception (these are two of the terms used by Lacan himself). And language is part of the imaginary as much as it is part of the symbolic; and the same goes for vision which is present in every register. That is why I think it is important to stress that the imaginary is first and foremost *a structural operation*: something that is created, something that is enforced. And this is why in order to think a dimension of the visual that is heterogeneous from the specularity of vision, we need to think the gaze counterintuitively because it is almost inevitable to have the tendency to "specularize" the gaze and to envision it, to represent it as something primarily visible.

To think that the imaginary is an operation means also to think that is secondary, that it is mediated, that it is a reactive operation. The imaginary is a rejection of the cut of the structure, which makes it appear as a One. That is why it is an illusion. The empirical evidence of reality is the true register of illusion (as Lacan puts it in Seminar XIII "we open our eyes to imagine").

1.2 From Lack to Phallus

Now that we have situated the genesis of the imaginary in the realm of communication and speech, we should turn our attention to the same process from the point of view of the visual. When the erasure of the difference of the signifier and its transformation into a One takes place, vision-as-we-know-it occurs. The specular register – the immediate natural experience of the visual perception – is founded precisely on this gesture of rejection of the signifier. What we believe is the natural experience of vision is actually the product a certain specific structural operations.

Another way to say it is that *the operation of the imaginary is an operation of positivization of a lack*. In what sense? It was Melanie Klein who emphasized how it is impossible for the body of a child to be inhabited by a pure lack: the child has the natural tendency of translating phantasmatically his primordial lack into an object outside of himself. And Lacan said something very similar in Seminar IV (Lacan 1994) when he differentiates *privation*, the real lack of a body before any external object is present, as a primordial anxiety, from *frustration*: it occurs when a lack is already dialectically positivized. The former is an undetermined primordial lack, while the latter is a lack that already presupposes a whole: it presupposes that *something* is lacking. The translation of lack in frustration is the primary consequence of the operation of the imaginary, from which a series of effects can be derived. This is what in the clinical Lacanian debate is called the “clinic of the imaginary”: what concerns the encounter with the individual small others and reality in general.

As it has been pointed out by Daniele Tonazzo:

If, for Lacan, [the imaginary] is the threshold of the visible world, it is because visibility in the optical realm, is the determination of a pure absence as presence; and the invisibility, on the other side, is the return of the indeterminacy from which the field of the imaginary has been constituted. (Bonazzi and Tonazzo 2015)

If the operation of the imaginary is an operation through which the primordial anxiety is positivized, the return of the indeterminacy of invisibility is the mark in the visible of the fact that the visible world is only the consequence of a structural operation. Or, to put it in other terms, it is the mark that the imaginary is not Whole nor a reflection but a constituting principle.

How can this return of invisibility occur? The return of invisibility (or ambiguity) in the realm of the imaginary has a very specific name in psychoanalysis, which is *phallus*.

It was Freud who implicitly developed this point regarding the functioning of the phallus in the realm of the imaginary. At the end of his life he had to reconsider the problematic of castration, as it can be seen in particular in a short text from 1938 called *Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense* (Freud 1964, 271-272). The prohibition of incest – which is the way through which, in Freud, the relation of the subject with the symbolic order is articulated – does not depend on the elimination of the primordial father but on that strange individual experience for the boy of looking at the female genitals, and for the girl, of watching her own genitals at the mirror. What has to be stressed, beyond

Freud's literal meaning, in this experience is that the *phallus* is always awaited *in its place...* in a place that in the anatomy of the body cannot be found.

The image of the phallus is therefore negativized in the specular image of the body. There is a remainder of libido that is not transposed in the specular image and that renders the image of the body in the mirror lacks something. In the image of the mirror, the phallus is not perceived *there in the place where it should be*: there is a place in the image that lacks an element that occupies it; a place without an element, which in the Lacanian symbols will be indicated with $-\phi$.

There are several different examples in Lacan's seminars of such a peculiar visual dissymmetry, but two of them are particularly striking. In Seminar VIII on *Transference*, in the session of 21 June 1961, Lacan talks of a dream by a hysterical woman in which her "father appears with his complete image, but censored at the level of genitals under the form of the disappearance of pubic hair" (Lacan 2015). Lacan goes back to this phenomenon also in Seminar X:

I remember that this film was one of the last things presented in the Societe psychanalytique de Paris before we went our separate ways. The separation was quite close at hand and maybe the film was only watched somewhat distractedly. But for my part I had my wits about me and I still recall the gripping image of the little girl before the mirror. If there is something that concretizes this reference to the non-specularizable dimension that I pointed up last year, then it's this little girl's gesture, her hand quickly passing over the gamma of the junction where her belly meets her thighs, like a moment of giddiness faced with what she sees. (Lacan 2014, 202)

This feeling of vertigo is the libido that is not projected in the image and that is retained by the body (this is also why for Lacan libido is structurally always phallic). Something of that primordial anxiety of the body is not passed into the image of the body-counted-as-One. So this is the invisibility that is not positivized in the image of the mirror and is therefore counted in the image as absent (or better “negativized”, as $-\phi$). There is something that is not transposed in the visual, something that is not mirrored and does not respond to the specular dialectic of the projection of the image of the body.

So what is the status of this invisibility of the phallus and why is it important in order to think the visual field? It is important here to stress that this negativization of the phallus is not a lack at the level of perception. Nothing is lacking at the level of the empirical perception of an image. This is why the reflected image in the mirror is always an imperfect reflection: something is negativized even though it is expected to be there. According to psychoanalysis the visual is never transparent or empirically constituted: something is present as absent. And that is why we can have an *erotic* of the visual.

The phallus marks the passage from the *mirror*, according to which the One of the body would be perfectly reflected and positivized in the reflected image, to the *screen* that inevitably gives the impression of hiding something beyond it.

1.3 For an Erotics of Vision

In Western thought vision always had this ambiguous status: on one hand the capacity for observing, verifying, certifying (as it is known, in Ancient Greek the term used for “I know” and “I saw” were the same, *oida*), but on the other also the temptation of illusion, deceit, fascination and marvel. Vision can be either a proof (like in legal context, for instance) or an illusionary deceiving trick, masking the truth and making it inaccessible. It seems therefore inevitable that vision is bound to an excess and to a disequilibrium, which is already implied in the very act of looking as enabling consciousness to escape from the place occupied by the body in order to go beyond itself (the eyes being at threshold of the body, and going beyond itself).

But many are the excesses traditionally connected to the experience of vision: from mystical ecstasies which tend to overcome the limits of worldly visibility; to the excesses that overcome the limits of memory and the irreversibility of time in the techniques of preservation of the visual experience (like death masks or modern photographic devices, as in the famous “mummy complex” of André Bazin (Bazin 1967) or in the search for the lost object in Roland Barthes reflection on photography (Barthes 1982). Vision seems to be able to go beyond subjective and temporal limits and to be able to reach a dimension of visibility that is always beyond what is accessible.

There has always been a double and contradictory approach toward these excesses, a mixture of fascination and obsession: on one hand an attempt to control these excesses, dominate them, geometrize them; on the other hand a wish to amplify and

enlarge the potentiality of vision, and to create always new artifices to enhance it (like the microscope, increasingly more powerful lenses, and in the 20th century the invention of the artificial eye of the movie camera).

But in the long history of excesses connected to vision a very special place might be given to a reflection developed by the science-fiction writer H. G. Wells in a short story which will be a starting point for my argument. The title – *The Country of the Blind* – already reveals that what is at stake in this text is the experience of vision.

1. 3. 1 The Unrest of Vision. H. G. Wells and The Country of the Blind

The Country of the Blind is the story of Nuñez, a mountaineer who lived all his life in the cosmopolitan big city of Bogotá in Colombia. In the attempt to reach the top of the highest mountain of the neighboring country of Ecuador he falls down on the other side of the mountain, miraculously uninjured, and discovers a valley perfectly cut off from the rest of the world on all sides by steep precipices. As soon as he looks around he realizes that this place must be inhabited by someone: everywhere there are green meadows irrigated with extraordinary care, bearing evidence of systematic exploitation piece by piece. Stone houses are astonishingly clean, here and there their parti-coloured facade is pierced by a door, even though it is impossible to spot even a single window. It turns out that the valley was for decades a haven for settlers fleeing the tyranny of

Spanish rulers, until an earthquake reshaped the surrounding mountains, cutting the valley off forever from future explorers. The isolated community prospered over the years, despite a disease that struck them early on, rendering all their children blind at a very young age. The blindness spread over many generations until not a single villager could see, and the community managed to adapt and to organize a social life completely without sight.

At first Nuñez, being the only person who can see, thinks that he could easily rule the village and keeps repeating to the proverb "In the Country of the Blind, the One-Eyed Man is King". But very soon he realizes not only that the villagers did not have any concept of sight, but that everything that he tries to teach them about this sense that they had no knowledge of, does not have any meaning for them. Upon his arrival, almost as if he were an alien, he is brought before the elders of the village:

Nuñez found himself trying to explain the great world out of which he had fallen, and the sky and mountains and such-like marvels, to these elders who sat in darkness in the Country of the Blind. And they would believe and understand nothing whatever that he told them, a thing quite outside his expectation. They would not even understand many of his words. For fourteen generations these people had been blind and cut off from all the seeing world; the names for all the things of sight had faded and changed; the story of the outer world was faded and changed to a child's story; and they had ceased to concern themselves with anything beyond the rocky slopes above their circling wall (Wells 1904).

Nuñez realizes very soon that an entire society could be perfectly organized even without the sense of sight. And it could work just as well as in the outside world (if not better). Blind men of genius invented new philosophies which questioned their belief

from their seeing days, dismissed all these things as idle fantasies and replaced them with new and saner explanations. New imaginations were created based on their ever more sensitive ears and fingertips. Birds were considered angels, whose presence villagers could hear but were not able to touch. The time was divided into “the warm” and “the cold”, which were the blind equivalents of day and night, and given that the presence of light was not an issue for them, they organized their working life at night, and sleeping when the temperature was warmer during the day.

It was marvelous with what confidence and precision they went about their ordered world. Everything, you see, had been made to fit their needs; each of the radiating paths of the valley area had a constant angle to the others, and was distinguished by a special notch upon its kerbing; all obstacles and irregularities of path or meadow had long since been cleared away; all their methods and procedure arose naturally from their special needs. Their senses had become marvelously acute; they could hear and judge the slightest gesture of a man a dozen paces away: could hear the very beating of his heart. Intonation had long replaced expression with them, and touches gesture, and their work with hoe and spade and fork was as free and confident as garden work can be. Their sense of smell was extraordinarily fine; they could distinguish individual differences as readily as a dog can, and they went about the tending of llamas, who lived among the rocks above and came to the wall for food and shelter, with ease and confidence. It was only when at last Nuñez sought to assert himself that he found how easy and confident their movements could be (Wells 1904).

Not only Nuñez were explanations about the seeing world not welcomed with reverence as he expected, but very soon he started to be treated as an outcast and relegated at the margins of the blind society. In the second part of the story, after having become the slave of a villager named Yacob, Nuñez falls in love with the latter’s youngest daughter, Medina-Saroté. After having won her confidence, he slowly starts to

explain to her what sight is, but even though she treats him gently, she dismisses his stories as imagination. The more the story progresses, the more we realize that vision is not only useless in *The Country of the Blind*, but that its excess puts Nuñez in danger (in every physical confrontation blind men outnumber him and threaten to kill him). When he asks for his girlfriend's hand in marriage, he is turned down by the village elders on account of his "unstable" obsession with that strange thing called "sight". Of course at the end, Nuñez is forced to decide: either his sight (or we can say, his "uncontrollable" *jouissance* of seeing) or his inclusion in the society of the village. The village doctor suggests that his eyes should be removed, claiming that they are diseased and because of this "his brain is in a state of constant irritation and distraction". At first Nuñez consents to the operation because of his love for Medina-Saroté, but at the end, on the day of the operation, while all the villagers are asleep, he tries to escape in the mountains (with no equipment) hoping to find a passage to the outside world and to abandon the valley. In the original story of 1904, Nuñez climbs in the surrounding mountains until night falls, and he rests, weak with cuts and bruises, but happy that he left the valley. His fate is not revealed, even though the detail of the absence of the equipment might make us leaning toward a somber ending. In the revised and expanded version of 1939, Nuñez sees from a distance that there is about to be a rock slide. He attempts to warn the villagers, but again they scoff at his "imagined" sight, and at the end he flees the valley during the slide, taking Medina-Saroté with him.

There are multiple reasons why H.G. Wells extraordinary story is significant for a reflection on the excesses of vision, but two are especially relevant for our discussion. First, it is interesting to note that the blind people are not prevented from having all the benefits of sight given by measurement, calculation and in general by a controlled organization of reality: they simply acquire all these resources from using other senses. Far from being at a disadvantage, the lack of sight becomes a mean through which they can liberate themselves from the “excess” of the *jouissance* of vision and have a more rational organization of their social life. Second, when Nuñez tries to explain to them the wonders of the sky, of the clouds, of the stars, they have the impression of “a hideous void, a terrible blankness in the place of the smooth roof to things in which they believe”. Wells is able to reverse our perspective on the organ of sight: vision is a *curse*. Not only is it not of any help in the balance of power between Nuñez and the blind – given that in a society constructed for the blind, hierarchical structures and the organization of force follow that particular organization – but detached from its social use, seeing becomes undistinguishable from hallucination. The blind are therefore right: because he is able to see, Nuñez’s “brain is in a state of constant irritation and distraction”. Vision is not a rational tool that helps human beings in organizing reality. It does not pacify our relationship with the world, but rather it leaves us in constant distress. *Vision is really a curse.*

1.3.2 The Lacanian Screen

Why there is such an *unrest* concerning the experience of vision? Why – as the H.G. Wells story seems to tell us – does our vision seem to be inevitably plagued by *jouissance* and hallucination?

Sight seems always to be divided in two: between what I see and I have in front of me, and what my eyes are constantly searching for, moving from an object to another, from a space to another. The problem of sight is never what it is there, but what it is beyond, what is hidden, what is concealed by something. The best example of the structural and inevitable *unrest* of vision are the movements of the pupils of someone watching out of the window on a moving train, passing from an object to another at an unsustainable pace. As if, even despite the seemingly calmness of the passenger, the pupils were in a constant state of tension. According to Jean Starobinski “of all the senses, sight is the one most obviously ruled by impatience. [...] If not betrayed by an excess or want of light, the gaze is never satisfied. It opens the way to an unrelenting assault” (Starobinski 1989, 3-4)

The psychoanalytic term for this constant impatience is of course *drive*. But if Lacan until a certain point seems to develop a dualistic notion of vision, where the scopic field is either perfectly inscribed in the pacifying stability of the Imaginary or disrupted by the intrusion of a non-specularizable and hallucinatory *gaze*, starting from

Seminar XIII, *L'objet de la psychanalyse* in 1965-1966 (Lacan 1965-1966), the distance between these two understandings of vision is progressively diminished. The notion of phantasm (or fantasy) in the mid-60s renders significantly more complex an idea of the scopic field that is not just constantly invaded and disturbed, but also framed and organized, by *jouissance*. What previously was the reason of the collapse of the Imaginary turned out to be the pillar for a new form of precarious stability. The field of visibility is no longer a flat and neutral surface: it is charged with erogenous libido which creates a visual environment full of opacities, shadows, glitches. Lacan develops at this regard the concept of screen or scopic phantasm, which in framing and creating the conditions of the visual perception, also distorts it and diverts it in one and the same gesture. We can say that there are two notions of screen:

a) In the session of May 11, 1966, Lacan called the libidinal dimension of this phantasmatic screen a *Vorstellungrepräsentanz*, a complex Freudian term that has a long history of translation problems but which usually is translated as “ideational representative”. Freud struggled with this concept when he tried to elaborate on the relationship between the somatic and the psychic, or between drive and its symbolic representatives. *Repräsentanz* in fact could be translated as “delegation” in the sense of a “group of representatives”, while *Vorstellung* is classically referred to as representation. *Vorstellungrepräsentanz* would be therefore the representative/delegate in a representation, in this case the delegate of somatic drive in the field of psychic

representation (in this case visual) (Freud 1961, 286-300).

In Freud's terminology drive being purely somatic, should remain outside of the act of repression in the unconscious. Nevertheless he also noted that there was an expression of endosomatic excitations also on the psychical/representational level. According to Jean Laplanche the concept of a psychic representative in Freud's view "bridges the gap between the somatic and the mental. On the somatic side, drive has its source in organic phenomena generating tension from which the subject is unable to escape; but at the same time, by virtue of its aim and of the objects to which it becomes attached, drive has a destiny (*Triebchicksal*) that is essentially psychical" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 364).

Freud is ambivalent regarding this position because he realizes that drive is a strange concept, reluctant to be fully reduced to the somatic, but at the same time not completely transferrable into the psychic as a symbolic/signifier element. He uses the term "delegate" in order to try to remedy the confusion. But if on one hand it is drive itself which appears as 'the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind,' on the other it becomes part of the process of somatic excitation, in which case it is represented in the psyche by 'drive representatives' which comprise two elements—the "ideational (or symbolic) representative" and the quota of affect. It is the latter which introduces a quantitative libidinal factor, which for Freud is of crucial importance: "the vicissitude of the quota of

affect belonging to the representative is far more important than the vicissitude of the idea”.

The idea of the screen as a converter of *jouissance* in the scopic field – as an apparatus that frames the quota of jouissance implied in the visual experience – is of capital importance in this seminar of Lacan. Especially because it creates a different and more complex relation between the image and the scopic drive that is not as dualistic as the alternative of Imaginary and *gaze* which characterized many Lacanian reflections on the topic.

b) But of course, aside from this concept of the screen, there is also another one, equally important: the screen as a veil that hides something that is placed beyond itself and that eludes the eye. “The hidden fascinates” says Jean Starobinski. Or, as Montaigne asks: “Why did Poppaea conceive the idea of masking the beauties of her face, except to make them dearer to her lovers?” (Starobinski 1989, 1). We can see this portrayed in the famous painting of the Fontainebleau school where the Roman Empress’ body is hidden behind an almost imperceptible veil. Would the beauty of her face be the same if it were fully disclosed to our eyes? In Western aesthetic there is a long history of fascination for these subtle strategies of dissimulated display, of which Lacan was well aware, as we can see in his reference to the famous story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius in Seminar XI (Lacan 1978).

Is a screen an image that points beyond itself toward a mysterious and magical space triggering the desire of the seer? Is the visual field destined always to be minimally a *trompe l'oeil* and a trap for the viewer's eyes? This fascination which emanates from the veil seems to be linked to an insufficiency in the object: instead of holding our fascination, it increases our fascination for what is beyond, in an obscure dimension that the eye is not (yet) able to see. But as Starobinski points out:

objects can seem insufficient only in response to an exigency in our gaze, which, awakened to desire by an allusive presence and finding no employment for all its energies in the visible thing, transcends it and loses itself in an empty space, headed for a beyond from which there is no return (Starobinski 1989, 2).

The face of Poppaea, once unveiled, runs the risk of being disappointing, or even worse, of being itself a veil, masking another elusive object of desire that her lover will then start to search for elsewhere, in an infinite process that recalls Hegelian bad infinity (where there will be no concrete objects but only veils).

It is not only that the screen as veil is destined to be bound to a constant sense of frustration and to the need to overcome every appearance and everything that is immediately visible, according to a logic that is not devoid of a certain sense of cynicism. It is also that its strategy of *trompe l'oeil* is too linked to the arousal of the viewer's desire⁴ and it reduces the quandary of the visual field to an interplay of inter-subjective consciousness.

⁴ Here Laura Mulvey [Mulvey 1975, 6-18] is right to point out that every example inevitably re-proposes the model of the male gaze and the woman veiling the object of desire.

1.3.3 Looking with No Eyes

During the session of June 1, 1966 Lacan clarifies that these two notions of the phantasmatic screen – despite being useful to explain the functioning of the visual field – need to be radicalized and further pursued. We should not be deceived by the term “screen”: the gaze is not simply a filter of *jouissance* between a subject of vision and a perceived object that would otherwise interact with each other according to an arrow-like model of vision (a vision as a connection of two points). The screen does not function as a deviation in what is otherwise a neutralized space. The concept of the scopophilic phantasm puts into question the very idea of a visual representation, according to which there would still be a hard-core reality independently from the interposition of a screen of visual *jouissance*. It is not only that the *gaze* does not belong to the subject: it does not belong to the object either! Gaze is not the object that looks back at us (in a way that would not be qualitatively different from our own vision), unless we understand object as an *object (a)*, meaning a paradoxical object that does not have any localization in the visual field. The gaze puts into question the very idea that vision can be understood as a line that connects two different points in a neutralized space (geometrical space).

Even in the most counter-intuitive understandings of the visual field, even in the most complicated geometrical models (such as projective geometry, which is analyzed in

Seminar XIII at great length) it is difficult to avoid to imagine vision as an interaction between elements in a space. But what if *gaze* would exactly be the very condition of that space? What if a *scopic phantasm* would be precisely the resource that we rely on in order to think *how a visual interaction might look like*? In this sense even when we try to objectify as much as possible how a visual space might look (as in the god's-eye shot at the end of a film, where all the interplay of points of view is finally seen from above), we still end up thinking of vision as a *single point* in a three dimensional (or even bi-dimensional) space. In order to think of a different *model* of vision, and not of a different specific interaction within the same model, we need to turn to formalization, we need to think of a radically different formalization of space: a non-Imaginary visualization. Non-Euclidean geometries, for example, historically managed to deal with spaces beyond three dimensions through mathematical formalization: they manage to have extremely sophisticated descriptions of non-3D spaces that even had many concrete technological applications (Riemannian geometry, for example, was one of the building block of Einstein's theory of relativity). In a way, geometry managed to *look* at non-three dimensional spaces, without using the eyes.

1.3. 4 Godard and a Non-Imaginary Cinema

How could cinema relate to such a description of the visual field, when the *unrest*

of vision is brought beyond a subjective experience into the very conditions that enable us to think the visual field? Is cinema able to go beyond the dualistic model of the Imaginary consistency and the disrupting intrusion of scopic *jouissance*? Isn't cinema destined to be relegated to this back-and-forth movement of deconstruction and reconstruction of the Imaginary? Does it invoke an appearance of the *gaze* that would disrupt the consistency of the Imaginary only to re-suture it on the screen?

In the 2007 documentary *Morceaux de conversations*, directed by Alain Fleischer, Jean-Luc Godard makes a fundamental reflection in order to understand his theoretical path in recent years: the fundamental equation of the cinematographic invention is not photographic image + time, but microscope + telescope. It means that cinema is not a way to stop time and ensure that what we have in front of our eyes will not disappear and always remain at our disposal. Cinema is rather a mechanical apparatus that makes possible to see features of the visual field that our eyes are not able to see. Its predecessor is science, not photography. What Godard wants to say is that if we think the visual field where we are immersed, the large majority of things are completely invisible to us despite being present: sub-atomic particles, electrons and invisible matter, but also electromagnetic radiations and forces that come as far away as from the sun into our own room. The telescope and the microscope make the infinitely small and the infinitely large accessible to our own eyes. As the Monet quotation puts it at the beginning of one of Godard's last films, *Adieu au Langage*: "we do not [make cinema] of

what we see, nor of what we do not see. We make cinema about the fact that we cannot see." It means not only that cinema emerges from a place that our eyes cannot reach, but that cinema is always constructed as speculation regarding the presence of an absence: the fact that the visible is mostly constructed by absences (like electromagnetic fields).

Today – Godard asks in Fleischer’s documentary – is there still an instrument (or a visual syntax) which can show in the world, not the infinitely small (regarding which we have quantum mechanics), nor the infinitely large (regarding which we have astrophysics), but the “infinitely average,” meaning “us, a good number of animals, and trees and everyday objects?” Is there a way to show that the visible is “not-all,” as Lacan would say in Seminar XX, even of all the things that we have in front of our eyes? According to Lacan the visible is structurally “not all”: it means not that there is a slice of the visible that is not accessible because it is hidden somewhere, and we just need to bring the camera there in order to bring it to visibility (like in the obsessive recording of every detail of our life with our cell phone) as if every story of our world is worth telling just because it has not been told before.

According to Godard, cinema, unconsciously, told us: no, the visible that is in front of us, it is not what we see. “When a boy and a girl talk to each other,” continues the Swiss filmmaker, “it’s not only that, there must be something else”. This is why a cinema like the one of Philippe Garrel or of Hong Sang-soo – who have spent years and years shooting basically the same story about “a man and a woman” – is of great

importance. Because in coming back over and over again to the most simple and banal of stories (and their films are increasingly more minimalistic and shorter every year), they were able to show that there is something that is structurally absent not because it is hidden somewhere and we have to go find it (like in the model of the screen as veil). The visible is not a matter of revelation, unveiling or disclosure (as if seeing would mean purely representing things that are already there fully constituted in the outside world): it's a matter of inhabiting it (or better, of manipulate it through the movie camera).

2. A Gaze Without Eyes

2.1. Traversing the mirror

«Oh, Kitty! how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House! I'm sure it's got, oh! such beautiful things in it! Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through...» She was up on the chimney piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass WAS beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist. In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room (Carroll, 2009, 19-20).

What will happen if we would try to go through the mirror in order to see how things exist behind it? What is Alice exactly searching for on the other side of the mirror? And why would there be something more interesting beyond it? After all, a mirror simply reflects what is already on this side of it? *Alice Through the Looking Glass* begins during a boring afternoon when Alice and Kitty are playing. They imagine what the house would look like. Here is the curious description: "I'll tell you all my ideas about Looking-glass House. First, there's the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way." The problem lies in what Alice sees and cannot see: "I can see all of it when I get upon a chair – all but the bit behind the fireplace. Oh! I do so wish I could see THAT bit!" Here is the problem: "THAT bit" which triggers her curiosity and her desire to cross the threshold and to experiment directly how it is to live beyond that boundary. In Lewis Carroll things are

always upside down and mirrors do not always “mirror” what is in front of them. They leave out – like in this case – a little bit. They are not perfectly even mirrors. The mirror that we saw operative in the “mirror stage” largely used in the Lacanian orientation of film studies in the 70s risks clashing with a small opaque detail: the impression that instead of faithfully reflecting, there is something hidden. It is an apparently minimal shift that nevertheless will have some major consequences; indeed, also for our understanding of the image and for the passage from the imaginary to the Real of the visual: the mirror ceases to reflect and becomes a screen. Instead of reflecting things as they are, it starts to conceal something from the viewer’s eye. In the place of transparency, opaqueness emerges.

The problem of the image and the mirror is all contained in this small passage at the beginning of *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*: Alice sees something behind the mirror that goes unseen. There is a remainder that is left out in what otherwise seems to be a purely passive act of reflection. Lacan showed in the dialectic of the imaginary, which visual arts are usually based on, that there is a trick in the mirror stage: the mirror does not passively reproduce something that is already there; it rather constitutes it. The Ego of narcissism, the consistency of the image-as-an-object, has to be built through an operation. We called this operation the inscription of the One. It means that something that did not exist before is created as an object but at the same time we come to believe that this “something” had always been there: it was part of an already existing reality

that we just happen to perceive. The imaginary is consubstantial with the act of the emergence of reality as a multiplicity of discrete objects (and images, in this sense, are none other than discrete objects). Lacan was convinced that this process was possible only through the agency of an image: the Ego, the dialectic of narcissism, the idea of reality as an inter-relation of discrete objects are all by-products of this constitutive primacy of the image as it was narrated analogically through the “mirror stage.” But the imaginary inscribes itself twice: as an act and as erasure of this act. It is also the reason why according to the large majority of Lacanian oriented visual studies the imaginary is denounced and accused of ideological mystification; in the end it needs to be brought back to the real source of its appearance: the cut of the Two and of the structure.

The mirror therefore facilitates an illusionary trap, and in so doing it makes us become Egos, i.e. reified objects subjected to the law of the One. In this dialectic where Imaginary and Symbolic are inextricably tied up together there is an intruder, an element that opens up this process to a contingent dimension. Starting from the mid-60s, Lacan will begin to analyze this element that is left out in the dialectic of the Imaginary and the mirror: a little remainder, a small letter: *a*. As in *Alice*, it is enough that the mirror ceases to perfectly reflect its images back to viewer who begins to spot a minimal opaqueness (the “THAT bit” that Alice wants to see) that becomes a screen. The *a* is the small contingent intruder that morphs a mirror into a screen. Because of this *a*, an image will be important not for what it shows, but for what it does not show (while

dialectically alluding to it).

But we should not too quickly dismiss the Imaginary too quickly and reduce it to a register completely external to any asymmetrical intruder. It is important, in fact, when dealing with Lacan not to reduce the sequence of different registers into a mere temporal succession. If we were to do so, every register would remain unrelated to any other in its own substantiality. On the contrary, what happens is that a single register exposes and transposes to a higher level the impossible dialectic of the other two. On a purely structural level, the letter *a* therefore incarnates and contains the impossible resolution of the imaginary and the symbolic: namely that – as we already saw – the inscription of the narcissistic image needs to deviate from the purely dual and imaginary dialectic in order to pass through the symbolic Ego-Ideal of the circle of identifications; or, that the negatively defined symbolic structure that we saw in the concept of suture, needs a transcendent and extra-structural element in order to found itself. The imaginary is not able to achieve its own consistency absolutely if it does not pass through the symbolic, and the symbolic cannot found itself if it does not suture itself to the Real and so on. In late-70s, Lacan will topologically develop these relations with the figure of the Borromean knot, where every register comes both to incarnate and to express the non-rapport (and therefore the missing link) of the other two. It is important to underline such a topological relationality in order to avoid to pose a transcendent in-itself beyond the intrusion of the *a*.

Lacan will construct a very refined and counterintuitive formalization of the *a* in the visual field through the elaboration of the register of the Real, but such an insight could have been detected between the lines even as early as the elaboration of the imaginary in the 1950s. Something nightmarish, something slightly uncanny was already operative in the very dialectic of narcissistic recognition. The articulation of symbolic and imaginary registers has already shown that the mirrored narcissistic image cannot directly inscribe itself but gets refracted, rearticulated and multiplied in an infinite series of identifications, projections and intersubjective mediations that makes the pure tale of mirror recognition nothing more than an evolutionary myth. The dual register of imaginary projection and the dialectic detour that the symbolic operates on it are part of the same operation. But it should not be underestimated how the captivating and fascinating lure of this ideal double, more or less successfully sublimated by the Ego-Ideal, is never completely obliterated, for its phantasmatic aura always haunts even the most successful inscription of structure.

There is, therefore, a double movement that should be considered: on the one hand, the quantitative dimension in the dialectic between the One and the scission – the unifying principle of the imaginary gets replaced by the cut of the symbolic: the transition from the One to the Two – that we already saw operative in the movement of the structure; on the other hand a more qualitative – and libidinal – dimension proper to

the mirror image epitomized by the jubilatory aspect of the narcissistic image. The latter trait is never pacifying. The reflectivity of the mirror is inevitably haunted by a nightmarish dimension, that of the double. The Ego is always inhabited by a certain minimal foreignness, by an excessiveness that evades its control. It is the same shadowy dimension that makes the “fight of pure prestige” engaged with the fellow-image always in danger of precipitating a deadly confrontation, where the fellow image of the Self became at the same time the treasure of one’s own identity and the fiercest of all enemies. As much as the operation conducted by the Ego-Ideal is able to sublimate the dialectic of the mirror image in the subsequent series of symbolic identifications, a libidinal and shadowy remainder of that dual and deadly dimension of narcissistic Self will never be completely taken out. As it was beautifully developed by Mladen Dolar:

The motive of the double, the alter ego, to which Freud devoted some reflections in his famous paper *The Uncanny*, is maybe the simplest way to envision this other side. The motive takes the narcissistic choice of love object literally and thereby destroys it: one meets one's double, a *Doppelgänger*, someone exactly like oneself, and the result is the very opposite of jubilatory self-recognition: one is inexorably heading for a disaster. A profound anxiety emerges as soon as the mirror other becomes independent, when it stops being a “simple reflection” (is the reflection ever simple?). The immediate realization of the narcissistic model brings about its disruption, the dissociation of the gaze and recognition. The double displays the ambiguity of narcissistic recognition in the most immediate sense: the mirror image is myself and at the same time the other, and therefore all the more alien; since it constitutes my narcissistic homeliness, at the closest to my core, it is all the more threatening (Dolar 1996, 136).

There is therefore already within the dialectic of the specular Other something of the “inexorable disaster” that represents the other side of the same coin of the successful

path of recognition. As underlined by Dolar, there is a “dissociation of gaze and recognition” that is already implied – internally – in the very dialectic of narcissism. That very fascinating lure – between nightmare and love, as a very long romantic and cinematographic topos variously portrayed – stands there as a warning that a dimension of the image cannot be exhausted in the dialectic between imaginary and symbolic, or between narcissism and signifier. A remainder of the mirror reflection is an essential part of the reflection itself. And this remainder can very well assume the shape of a nightmare.

What Alice shows us in “THAT bit” that awakens her curiosity, is that the image of the mirror (but we can say at this point an image in general) contains a part of itself that does not show something, but rather conceals something behind. The mirror thus is not only split between its captivating reflection and its constituent reality; it is also split between a seeming transparency and a lure that hides something beyond it. The mirror of *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* can be taken as a model in order to address the passage from specularity to the Real of the gaze as conceptualized by Lacan from the mid-60s: that *objection* that jeopardizes the pure transparency of the mirror. What the mirror leaves out in its presumed reflectivity is none other than a dimension of opacity; formerly it was believed to be a pure transparency. The specularity of the mirror morphs into a screen: what is at stake is no more what is in front of it, but rather what is behind. But on the other hand, gaze, in a more qualitative manner, is also that impossible

threshold that blurs the division between homeliness of recognition and its uncanny threat. What Lacan forces us to do, in a very dialectical *tour de force*, is to grasp those two incarnations of gaze in a single concept. Gaze is the opaque part of the mirror that suddenly from a pure transparency starts to hide something, but it is also the totality of the narcissistic image when, at the peak of its successfulness, its very homeliness starts to morph into an uncanny double. We will see that the problem of the gaze is in fact first and foremost the problem of its always ambiguous localization, when its being a part and its being the totality of the image will overlap.

2.2. A Vision as an Arrow (Geometral optics)

Jacques-Alain Miller claimed that at least in the first period of Lacan's teaching we have a clear relativization of the speculative potentialities of the visual. The image is usually explained according to the causality of the signifying chain. In this sense, the traditional understanding of Lacanianism in film studies in the 70s, in Baudry and Metz, for example, will not move significantly beyond the argument that reduces the imaginary to a byproduct caused by the symbolic. According to this early understanding of Lacan, a human being is doomed to the fascination for its own reflected image in the mirror, as it is expressed in the dialectic of narcissism, only because of a defective identity in terms of signifier. It is what we defined as the primacy of the Two over the

One. Something similar occurs also regarding phallic identification, where the visual comes to play a role only as a stand-in for the master signifier of the signifying chain. Miller claims that in order to have the specificity of the domain of the visual – what Lacan will do with the concept of gaze starting from 1962 – it is first necessary to question a widespread and very common understanding of visual *perception* modeled on St Thomas Aquinas' epistemological principle, the *adequatio rei et intellectus* (Miller 1996, 254-255).

According to this theory there are only two actors in the visual field: an active one – the *percipiens* – and a passive one – the *perceptum*. Perception is made possible by the actions of the *percipiens*, which has to transcend itself and makes a visual synthesis of the various events of the world occurring in its presence. It is this that directs the encounter with the perceived object, but at the same time does not decide whether what was perceived corresponds or not to reality. Perception can be full of contradictions, mistakes, traps: there are hallucinations, uncertainties, visual tricks etc. Sometimes a person can be brought even to the point of believing that what he has perceived exists for him alone and that others cannot perceive it. Perception, in fact, is always over-determined by a norm. If what someone sees is believed to be non-existent for the large majority, it means that what he has simply seen incorrectly. Good perception is defined as successful only when the *percipiens* can adequate its experience to the *perceptum*: the latter is an “in-itself” that does not have the possibility of self-transcending itself in

order to go autonomously toward the *percipiens*. Perception is therefore only a matter of adequate encounter according to a given point of measurement. And given that the *perceptum* is the only “in-itself” among the two variables (it does not oscillate according to mood, conditions of occurrence, physiological capability) it best represents the point of measurement according to which it can be regulated by the success of the act. The main consequence is the emergence in visual perception of a normative problem: who decides whether a perception was successful or not? Who does decide between two different and opposing visual occurrences, what would be the one who was the closest to the *perceptum* and what was the most far?

The *adequatio rei et intellectus* has a specificity: there can only be an agreement between two different series when a third will decide unilaterally regarding the success of the agreement. And usually that third is an historically determined subject that does not decide according to a principle of transparency, but rather to a certain relationship or equilibrium of power. We considered a similar problem also in the foundation of the signifying chain when the necessary foundational act is always historically contingent. Jacques-Alain Miller chooses a very effective example in order to critique the epistemological model of the *adequatio*: the psychiatric treatment. Confronted with a person who suffers from hallucinations, the psychologist/psychiatrist tries to bring him back to reason by telling him: “What you see, I don’t see it; what you hear, no one is hearing it,” as if it would be possible to reduce hallucination to a mere error of

perception or to a defective adjustment to an arbitrary norm.

Lacan questioned the model of the *adequatio rei et intellectus* in visual perception in several ways: primarily through a reconsideration of the distribution of activity and passivity beyond the *percipiens-perceptum* couple. At first there seems to be a reverse: it is the object that occupies the place of the active pole and forces the individual to subject itself to it. According to Jacques-Alain Miller, it is the object which is complex and structured while the subject is only a secondary effect of it. In Slavoj Žižek's words:

If, then, the subject's activity is, at its most fundamental, the activity of submitting oneself to the inevitable, the fundamental mode of the object's passivity, of its passive presence, is that which moves, annoys, disturbs, traumatizes us (subjects): at its most radical the object is that which objects, that which disturbs the smooth running of things. Thus the paradox is that the roles are reversed (in terms of the standard notion of the active subject working on the passive object): the subject is defined by a fundamental passivity, and it is the object from which movement comes – which does the tickling (Žižek 2006, 17).

But the reversal of the relation is only a part of the critique. The main issue at stake is the *form* of the connection between the two: the principle that over-determines the *totality* of the relation. In every account of vision that takes as a starting point a relation between *two* objects – no matter whether they are passive or active – there is already an implicit presupposition extremely problematic and that will be profoundly criticized through the theory of gaze. This principle will have major consequences for the epistemology implied in film studies, where the encounter between spectator and screen generally follows perfectly the model of the *adequatio rei et intellectus*. Vision is defined as an occurrence happening between an eye and an object (screen, object of

reality), but what happens outside of their strict dual relation is almost never taken into account.

What is left in the background is none other than space. The *adequatio* is modeled on the transitive verbs. Vision can be portrayed as an arrow launched from an active polarity toward a passive one where the background is necessarily considered as a constant – a neutral ground never really taken into account in the experience of perception. Vision is a line that starts from a point and ends in another, and what happens in between is not primarily taken into consideration. It is also an appropriative model: the active pole tries to possess the object in question following a model of accumulation of knowledge as in the concept of property. When Lacan introduced the concept of the gaze, he did not intend so much to reverse the relation and put the agency on the side of the object, but rather to re-think profoundly what an object is and how to think the form of the correlation subject-object of perception. What, starting from the early 60s, what will be defined as *object (a)* (and gaze is one of the embodiments of this function) is not the object-passive of perception, but first and foremost what is over-determining the totality of the relation.⁵ Gaze is different than a look because it does not come from an eye, like an arrow, launched in the direction of an object; it is rather a way to think the totality of the space where vision occurs. It addresses a dimension of the

⁵ According to Slavoj Žižek *object a* (or, rather, phantasy, which is the subjective mode of relation toward *object a*) is Lacan's continuation of Kant's critical project, for it determines the transcendental conditions of desire independently from the concrete and contingent appearance of a specific object of desire.

visual irrespective of the interplay between points of activity and passivity (and therefore a vision before it is subjectivized and reduced to *experience*). A good definition of the gaze would be, in fact, a mode of appearance of vision irreducible to experiential clarity. We will see that the gaze will mark a fundamental split between two ideas of conceiving space: space as a visualizable entity or as a correlate of human experience (as it is for example in the imaginary), and space as a possible formalized thought.

When Alice looks at the mirror and proclaims “I do so wish I could see THAT bit!” the point of emergence is not given by a specific concrete object, but by a certain stain of opacity that appears “behind the fireplace”: it is at the same time the obstacle that precludes a look and the will to overcome it. At first the gaze is a form of ambiguous and pointless rupture: what is produced in the absence of a concrete point that can absorb and orient the arrow launched from one point to another. If a look is always modeled on transitive verbs and always goes from a point to another; the gaze is similar to intransitive verbs. It is probably what Deleuze was thinking when claiming that things can see “by themselves” without anyone actually looking at them: even objects, inanimate things, inorganic matter can see. If the world is *omnyvoyeur*, it is in the precise sense of a vision that propagates intransitively as an attribute of matter itself, and not as an arrow that connects different discrete objects inhabiting an abstract and neutral background. A gaze is in fact an appearance of vision that cannot be visualized in a neutral space; it is reluctant to become subject to the imaginary, and in such a space

there are no concrete appearing objects which direct the propagation of vision. The gaze does not connect two objects: it is an object in itself, intransitively.

But before moving to a more detailed analysis of Lacan's conceptualization of the gaze, we will see how an internal critique of a linear understanding of vision as a correlation between subject and object has been implicitly developed by Michel Foucault in his famous commentary of Diego Velázquez *Las Meninas* (we will confront his analysis with the one developed by Lacan in *Seminar XIII The Object of Psychoanalysis* of 1965-1966) and by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and Invisible*. These three intermediate passages will lead us to articulate better the separation between vision as an occurrence in an imaginary space and the radical heterogeneity of the gaze where vision is no longer seen, but thought.

2.3 Velázquez's *Las Meninas* I. Michel Foucault

There are very few texts where a notion of vision as a linear connection between two points – a passive and an active – is brought to extreme consequences more clearly than in the first chapter of *The Order of Things* dedicated by Michel Foucault to the famous Diego Velázquez painting *Las Meninas* (Foucault, 1989). The whole argument is a perspicacious maneuver in order to highlight the complex web of gazes, internal resonances, implications, references, reversals, exchanges, reflections that makes this

painting such an extraordinary exercise in self-reflexivity and linguistic nuances. If, according to what Lacan defined as the “geometral optics of the imaginary,” vision is deployed as an arrow, the space circumscribed by this painting is a complex intersection of several vectors that cut the representation along multiple axes and individuate a multiplicity of passive and active points (along the dialectic of “see” and “be seen”). The result is a multiplication of lines that, when brought to the extreme of reciprocal overlapping, empties this model of vision from within. The exacerbated crossing of visual lines arrives at a point of radical opacity: the appropriative model of vision little by little starts to lose its grip precisely at the peak of its realization.

But let us briefly recall the subject of the painting and Foucault’s main argument. The story of *Las Meninas* is well known: Velázquez painted it in 1656 during one of the most prosperous times in the history of Spain. It is a famous example of a self-reflective painting and a quite refined reflection on the relation between reality and illusion. In fact, it depicts the making of a portrait, which we are brought to believe is the same one we have in front of our eyes (thus self-reflexive precisely because it shows its own means of production). Or at least it seems to portray a portrait given that the canvas is shown from the back, while the front is hidden from our vision. Aside from the painter caught in the moment of his labor, there are also other characters depicted at the very centre of the stage, mostly identifiable as members of the Spanish court. Among them in the foreground is the princess Infanta Margarita, five years old at that time, whose

position seems to make her the main subject of the art work. She is surrounded by an entourage of duennas, maids of honors, courtiers, and dwarfs among which historians recognized: two *meninas* (doña Isabel de Velasco who is poised to curtsy to the princess, and doña María Agustina Sarmiento de Sotomayor who kneels before Margarita offering her a drink); the Italian jester Nicolaso Pertusato; the dwarf Maribarbola; and standing just behind them doña Marcela de Ulloa, the princess' chaperone, dressed in mourning and talking to an unidentified bodyguard. To the rear and at the right, standing in front of an open door there is Don José Nieto Velázquez who might have been a relative of the painter. The fact of sharing the same name will play an important role in Lacan's interpretation. Consistent with an apparent idea of total transparency underlying the painting, Velázquez is not only showing the "backstage" of the work, but he tries also to show the subject-matter of the portrayed painting (not the one that we have in front of our eyes, but the one represented in the canvas): King Philip IV and his Queen Mariana of Austria. They would occupy the front of the scene if we were ideally prolonging the space of the room out of the frame (they would be more or less in the place where the spectators are looking at the painting), therefore they cannot be included in the picture. The trick used by Velázquez is to put a mirror in the back of the room reflecting the outside of the frame and bringing it back to visibility on its opposite side. The effect is an illusionary convergence of all the elements participating in the scene through a re-inscription of what is outside the painting inside the limits of the

frame. Some art historians claimed that it might have been the first time in art history when a mirror is not used in order to distort or duplicate an element which is already present in painting (like in the famous *Arnolfini Portrait* of Jan van Eyck or in the *Rokeby Venus* by Velázquez himself) but to diagonalize its vectors of reflection in order to “fold” its externality inside visibility.

This is how Deleuze developed the theory of non-relation between the articulable and the visible in Foucault (Deleuze, 1988): two orders impossible to be reduced to a strict isomorphism. But in *Las Meninas* we do not have a gap that occurs between images and words, but a cut within the same plane of the visible. There is one plane of visibility – more structuralist – which is reduced to the signifying dimension and aimed at underlining the internal relations as in the several lines that cut the space of the painting and distribute the elements according to different places (divided between the binomial S1 – S2 of “see” and “be seen,” active and passive and so on). But there is also another plane not constructed through vectors but through an intransitive and material propagation of lightness. We will see that Foucault’s interpretation will move along these two directions that also represent the two different declinations of the visual that we want to analyze: gaze as a heterogeneous element in the picture, and gaze as an intransitive scopic drive.

Foucault’s main argument is rather crucial and reminds us of a fundamental problem regarding the symbolic in Lacan: in every representation the foundational

element is structurally lacking. The typical example is the blind spot implied in every constitution of a visual field, whose exemplification in a painting could be the position of an actual painter who creates the work of art (in this case Velázquez): a place that has to be – by structural necessity – absent from the frame. In *Las Meninas* this point, as if it were a fold, is re-inscribed in the painting itself in the guise of a mirror that occupies, ironically enough, the centre of the stage. The point of invisibility (the structural blind spot) and the point of maximum visibility (in this case a point very close to the vanishing point of the perspective lines) are superimposed one onto the other; they are literally overlapping in the same place. It is a perfect illustration of the Lacanian concept of *extimité*: a maximum foreignness positioned at the most intimate core. What Jean-Pierre Oudart defined as the “fourth wall” (Oudart 1990) is here folded back inside of the frame with an effect of closing up the space: nothing is outside. A first consequence is that Velázquez operates a rendering immanent of invisibility: the painting does not treat invisibility as an impossible referent reluctantly reduced to the limits of representation nor as a transcendent “impossible to be expressed” because of a qualitative heterogeneity. Invisibility occurs inside. It is a place within the space of representation. The mirror function as a suture: a signifier of signification itself (or in visual terms: the visible stand-in of invisibility as such).

A surprising outcome concerns the vectorial lines of visibility: every character of the painting (the painter, Nieto at the door on the back, the Little Princess, and so on)

looks directly at a point occupied at the centre by the spectator, and the object of this look is reflected behind their back. Foucault notes that no one looks in the mirror, it is a voided visibility that cannot be appropriated by anyone, not even by the spectator who remains unreflected in it. It is interesting to note here that a visual line, usually rectilinear in the model of “geometral optics,” gets curved within the space of the painting as if it were undergoing a bending act or forcing. The characters look effectively at what in the painting is put behind their back: the active subject and the passive object of “geometral optics” are both on the same plane, close to one another. It is as if we have in front of our eyes a perfect figuration of a visual schema where the two polarities (what sees and what is seen) co-exist in the same place at the same time. Velázquez takes the vectorial dimension of vision and brings it to extreme consequences, as if he were stretching a line almost until a point when it is about to break.

But beyond underlining the almost topological self-reflexive movement of the visual lines, Foucault is interested in the combinatorial dialectic of elements and positions: several invisibilities pertaining to different levels of representation overlap in the same ideal point that superimposes we-as-spectators, Velázquez as a maker of the work of art and the model of the painting (the King and the Queen). His interest is focused on the structural impossibility of giving up the kernel of invisibility necessarily present in every strategy of visualization, even in a painting that tries to bring to extreme consequences a self-reflexive dialectic: “for in it there occurs an exact

superimposition of the model's gaze as it is being painted, of the spectator's as he contemplates the painting, and of the painter's as he is composing his picture (not the one represented, but the one in front of us which we are discussing)" (Foucault 1989, 16). He thus underlines the different vertical levels of positionality and the way they are articulated together more than the trajectories and the metaphorization of two different absences: "It may be that, in this picture, as in all the representations of which it is, as it were, the manifest essence, the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing – despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations, and portraits" (Foucault 1989, 17). There is thus an unsurpassable elision of visibility that even the most refined self-reflexive move is not able to come up with, and it does not pertain to a transcendent outside but is structurally, and internally, necessary in every representation.

According to Foucault, Velasquez visualizes a representation of every possible representation underlining not just the reasons why the three vertical levels (the spectator, the representation, the representation of the representation etc.) are superimposed one onto the other (the self-reflexive circle could go on forever in this regard) but also, and somehow crucially, how all the invisibilities that found the visible are parts of the same plane. There is an unsurpassable horizontality where all the impossibilities come together around "an essential void":

But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is

an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance (Foucault, 1989, 16).

Instead of trying to construct a dialectic of suture according to which there is a vertical jump from a level to a meta-level along different degrees of generalization (spectator – Velázquez – the portrayed painter – the subject matter of the portrayed painting and so on) his solution seems to move in the direction of a primary and originary co-participation in the same basic invisibility that cannot be eliminated in every strategy of visualization: “the profound invisibility of what one sees” is inseparable “from the invisibility of the person seeing.” According to Foucault, visibility and invisibility thus should not be brought to the extreme consequences in their dialectic of activity-passivity, subject-object etc. along the model of vectorial lines of propagation of vision (something, on the contrary, Velázquez seems to do). They should rather be considered as part of a continuum without a proper cut, as if they were two sides on the same Möebius strip. It will not be a surprise then to find a similar phenomenological tone in a part of the chapter where Foucault passes from a logic of distribution of positions to a reflection on the theme of lightness. Here the passage from a transitive understanding of vision to an intransitive one becomes evident:

Starting from the painter’s gaze, which constitutes an off-centre centre to the left, we perceive first of all the back of the canvas, then the paintings hung on the wall, with the mirror in their centre, then the open doorway, then more pictures, of which, because of the sharpness of the perspective, we can see no more than the edges of the frames, and finally, at the extreme right, the window, or rather the groove in the wall from which the light is pouring. This spiral shell presents

us with the entire cycle of representation: the gaze, the palette and brush, the canvas innocent of signs (these are the material tools of representation), the paintings, the reflections, the real man (the completed representation, but as it were freed from its illusory or truthful contents, which are juxtaposed to it); then the representation dissolves again: we can see only the frames, and the light that is flooding the pictures from outside, but that they, in return, must reconstitute in their own kind, as though it were coming from elsewhere, passing through their dark wooden frames. And we do, in fact, see this light on the painting, apparently welling out from the crack of the frame; and from there it moves over to touch the brow, the cheek-bones, the eyes, the gaze of the painter, who is holding a palette in one hand and in the other a fine brush... And so the spiral is closed, or rather, by means of that light, is opened (Foucault 1989, 12).

It is striking how in this passage Foucault discarded the clothes of the logical analyst of structural positions in order to turn to the materiality of light. The light creates in this “spiral shell” on one hand a metaphor of representation, where all its essential elements are recapitulated (the gaze, the palette and the brush, the canvas, the reflection, the real man) but, on the other hand, an intransitive “flooding” where the pictures reconstitute this lightness as if “it were coming from elsewhere” but, in fact, it pours “through their dark wooden frames”: intransitively, so to speak, not linearly. And, in fact, this light seems to be “welling out from the crack of the frame.” Foucault claims that it is from there that it touches “the brow, the cheek-bones, the eyes, the gaze of the painter” and not from the groove in the wall where the law of optics would place the source of the trajectory. Dario Melegari used a very effective definition of light for this painting: an “index of an external horizontality” (Melegari, 2005). And he underlines how such a light seems to caress evenly the contours of every object findable in the space thus erasing the relations of position which until then played such a crucial role

for Foucault's understanding of *Las Meninas*. From the light's point of view there is no difference between the position of the mirror, or the one of the painter, as there is no signifying relation involved. While the vectorial lines were creating multiple cuts and reversals between the elements, light seems to bring back the space to a common underlying materiality. The idea of a continuity between visibility and invisibility gains a new form of understanding here. Foucault seems opposed to a dialectical idea where invisibility emerges within the space of vision (and therefore to an understanding of vision modeled on the geometral optics of the imaginary), a radical and materialistic idea of a corporeal mixture of invisibility and visibility where every experience of vision stands out on a background of a profound intertwining of the two. Such an argument considers visibility and invisibility as two terms still too much indebted to the couple negativity/positivity. If we consider, for example, that visibility in its pure form (such as the source of light in a void space) would correspond to a blinding invisibility, every form of visibility would thus stand as a certain embodiment of the invisible consubstantial with it. Even though distancing himself from an imaginary understanding of vision, Foucault will end up problematically endorsing a materialistic definition of vision along the figure of a monistic continuity where there will not be any place for a cut or a break. Lacan, on the contrary, will not develop a critique of the geometral optics from the point of view of a supposed origin of vision where visibility and invisibility are indistinguishable (in a un-dissimulated form of the metaphysics of

presence) for the obvious reason that it would rely on another version of the One. He will, rather, endorse a paradoxical materialism of the cut itself. The gaze from this perspective will represent an insubstantial unbalance, which can never emerge at the level of the discrete objects in the imaginary, of the relation of visibility/invisibility. Or in other words, an embodiment of what in the Foucauldian “invisibility implicated in visibility” is destined to remain inevitably... invisible, but, nevertheless, operative. Lacan hypothesizes that an element, namely the object-gaze, even though present in space cannot appear at the level of visualization. Such an element is not a concretely existing object that even though out there is not available to the eyes (like an infinitely small particle): it is the very unbalance that defines the structural asymmetry of space itself and always makes its visualization problematic.

2.4 Merleau-Ponty and the corporeal dimension of vision

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of the visual field is an almost necessary step from Foucault’s account. Here the critique of a vision reduced to the duality between *percipiens* and *perceptum* will find a further and effective outcome. It will be in fact Lacan himself in Seminar XI in 1964, who when introducing the concept of the gaze, will refer extensively to Merleau-Ponty’s development of the topic. The problem relies on the nature of the visual as different (and in some sense opposite) from

the empiricist model of vision modeled on “geometral optics.” Lacan claims that “the essence of the relation between appearance and being [...] is not in the straight line, but in the point of light – the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections put forth” (Lacan 1978, 94). To prove such a point Lacan brings forward a series of biological arguments: for example the iris that does not react only to distance but also to light; or the physiological description of the organ-eye which maintains a complex and deep mechanism of relation with light. If for “geometral optics” it was enough to connect two points (one of them would be the eye-as-reduced to an unsubstantial point of active irradiation), in order to consider the totality of the visual a much larger context is needed, and what is at stake is not a connection of lines and points but the material entirety of one’s own body. With an entire life devoted to the study of the philosophical issues related to perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s specific work on vision will be published only posthumous in 1964 three years after his death. During a session of Seminar XI Lacan praised it as “a moment of arrival of the philosophical tradition – the tradition that begins with Plato” (Lacan 1978, 71) in assigning to Being the end of sovereign good, whose guide is recognized by the eye. It is in fact from the aforementioned late work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, that Lacan will take one of the most crucial insights in order to derive the concept of the gaze: the separation between the eye and the gaze, thus the cut that defines the unbalance at the core of the field of vision.

Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of the concept will nevertheless be very different from what Lacan developed in his seminar in 1964. The French phenomenologist started with a conviction: vision is not a problem of linear trajectories or the positions of elements; it is not even a problem of a different figuration in order to understand the propagation of light. It is first and foremost a problem of separation between vision and the organs involved. Visual perception does not only relate to the physiological stimuli of the organs in charge. Both Lacan and Merleau-Ponty in this regard are clear and share the same view, as provocative as it may sound: it is a possible to have a vision without the involvement of the eyes.

[This] eye is only the metaphor of something that I would prefer to call the seer's 'shoot' (pousse) – something prior to his eye. What we have to circumscribe, by means of the path he indicates for us, is the pre-existence of the gaze – I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides (Lacan 1978, 72).

Antonello Sciacchitano used quite an effective story in order to explain the meaning of the phrase "being looked at from all sides." It is in fact an example of visuality irreducible to the sum of the single points of view from where one could be looked at, as numerous as they may be. We should not therefore think about an exposure such as the one of being in a arena with thousands of eyes pointing at us. Sciacchitano gives in this regard a zoological example: plankton (prawn larvae, polyps, jellyfishes, worms etc.) constitute 80% of the planet biomass. Those organisms are provided with an extremely rudimentary visual apparatus constituted by two cells: a

pigmented cell and a photo-receptor. The first is a lid aimed at darkening the visual field while the second transmits the directional stimulus of the light ray to the muscular cells in order to enable the small animal to move toward the light (Sciacchitano, 2011). If we take this story seriously we have to admit that every time we swim in the sea we are (literally) swimming in a “sea of eyes,” even though no one would ever be able to detect them if not with a microscope. Merleau-Ponty’s idea of vision is close to this example. It is a vision that, more than with a connective line, it would be better visualized as a liquid that passes through a human being, it envelops it, it embraces it, it fills every small angle and void: “the look, we said, 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” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133).

Space acquires a peculiar and quite decisive role in this account. It is not a void container, it is certainly not the Newtonian or Euclidean space; it is rather profoundly attached to the specific anthropological dimension of the human being. It is in such a living space that the body will acquire a primary and decisive role. Vision and biological life will be conjoined together in Merleau-Ponty and in the context of *The Visible and the Invisible* they will become almost undistinguishable. The idea of continuity between the visible and invisible developed by Foucault will be translated by Merleau-Ponty in a straightforward monism: not just regarding visibility, but also for what regards the biological living body and its external boundary (the body will become almost an

holistic all-encompassing entity).

Because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh. One should not even say [...]that the body is made up of two leaves, of which the one, that of the 'sensible,' is bound up with the rest of the world. There are not in it two leaves or two layers; fundamentally it is neither thing seen only nor seer only, it is Visibility sometimes wandering and sometimes reassembled. And as such it is not in the world, it does not detain its view of the world as within a private garden: it sees the world itself, the world of everybody, and without having to leave 'itself' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 137-138).

The co-participation of bodies as "universal flesh" is a direct consequence of the impossibility of the body to be a for-itself. Any form of transcendence is radically rejected: everything is pure congregation of matter and as such the only possible exchange between bodies is given in the tactile register. Merleau-Ponty operates an absorption of visibility into the dimension of bodily exchange. It is one of the strongest critiques of an idea of visual perception as an immaterial relation like in the geometral optics of the imaginary. Vision is concrete and material, and materiality means bodies and flesh. Therefore vision can be understood only in the realm of bodily tactile relations. The continuity of visible and invisible is no different from any other body, and therefore becomes matter and flesh. Every understanding of vision as a negative withdrawal is abandoned for a universality of sensation where vision is just one among the many expressions of it. There is no doubt that Lacan will conduct his reflection on the visual in a very different direction if compared with the outcome of Merleau-Ponty's posthumous study but, nevertheless, the points where they agree are striking, given that a theory of the gaze in psychoanalysis would not have been possible without at least two

major Merleau-Pontian insights:

1) The critique of geometral optics. Merleau-Ponty (and phenomenology in general) developed a very consistent critique of any attempt to idealize the visual relation as a connection between elements, points, subjects/objects etc. The argument of the materiality of vision has, as a primary consequence, the one of liberating the representation of visual perception from two-dimensional space.

2) The idea of the primacy of vision. Vision comes first, it is not a relation between elements; it is not an occurrence that happens between already-given objects. It is, rather, an object in itself (in the form of the impersonal gaze). The eye or the subjects and objects involved in a visual occurrence are not organs or agencies that use vision from an active position: they are rather used by vision. They are incarnations of a vision that precedes and determines them.

2.4 Velázquez's *Las Meninas* II. Jacques Lacan

Lacan's argument against "geometral optics" is developed in a quite different fashion in comparison to how it was addressed by Foucault or Merleau-Ponty. The problem of the reduction of the visual space to an interplay of active and passive points is tackled from another side. First of all, it is impossible to reduce the subject of vision to a transparent substance of a *percipiens* in the guise of a subjective metaphysic of

presence. According to Lacan a subject is always unsubstantial: it is first and foremost subjected to the constituent division of the signifier. If the dialectic of the Two is what makes the emergence of the subject possible in the interstices of the binomial signifier (the structural space between S1 and S2), the reign of the Individual, on the contrary, is a product of the inscription of the One of the imaginary, which makes the consistency of the Ego possible. The subject is therefore split (*Ichspaltung* in Freudian terms): but what precisely operates at this very division? Lacan claims that a subject is divided between knowledge and truth. The model of the *adequatio rei et intellectus* of “geometral optics” proclaims on the contrary an overlapping between the two: when the active pole transcends itself in order to possess the *perceptum* according to a certain norm, the distance that separate knowledge and truth is elided, and the two terms become synonymous. In order to suspend this very epistemological model and make the emergence of the subject possible, it is necessary to make room for an act of separation.

Speech thus seems to be an all the more true instance of speech [une parole] the less its truth is based on what is known as its “correspondence to the thing”: true speech is thus paradoxically opposed to true discourse, their truth being distinguished by the fact that the former constitutes the recognition [reconnaissance] by the subjects of their beings insofar as they are invested [intéressées] in them, while the latter is constituted by knowledge [connaissance] of reality [réel], insofar as the subject targets reality in objects. But each of the truths distinguished here is altered when it crosses the path of the other truth (Lacan, 2006a, 291).

The more speech becomes a true instance, the less it is based on the model of *adequatio* between words and things. The signifier does not correspond to the thing.

There is no possible correspondence that does not pass from an elision of the subject of desire and subsequently from the closing up of the space opened by the separation between knowledge and truth. Correspondence passes from the suppression of the scission of the signifier, thus the only possible *adequatio* cannot but be in the illusionary field of the imaginary. This is precisely the reason why the “geometral optics” model that we see operative in every empiricist approach to the visual experience emerges at the background of a suppression of the subject of desire. What Lacan forces us to do is to see the underlying connection between the reduction of space to a neutral background along the model of Euclidean intuitive space *and* the elision (the closing the gap) of the subject of desire in the overlapping of knowledge and truth in the *adequatio* model. The dimension of truth is therefore specifically a consequence of the irruption of the cut of the signifier.

Here we also find the most prominent difference that separates the notion of the signifier from a pure instrumentalist understanding of language. It is not that we use words to better designate objects and to symbolize reality. Such a notion, still largely indebted to the model of *adequatio* usually leads to the postulation of a surplus, some excess of reality, that inevitably resists symbolization. It is what Slavoj Žižek defined as the “obscurantist theme of the unnameable Core of Higher Reality that eludes the grasp of language.” Something that has “to be thoroughly rejected; not because of a naïve belief that everything can be nominated, grasped by our reason, but because of the fact

that the Unnameable is an effect of language" (Žižek 2003, 70). What language does, in its most fundamental gesture, is the very opposite of designating reality: it digs a hole in it, it opens up a present reality toward the dimension of truth.

But it is clear that Speech begins only with the passage from the feint to the order of the signifier, and that the signifier requires another locus – the locus of the Other, the Other as witness, the fitness who is Other than any of the partners – for the Speech borne by the signifier to be able to lie, that is, to posit itself as Truth. Thus Truth draws its guarantee from somewhere other than the Reality it concerns: it draws it from Speech. Just as it is from Speech that Truth receives the mark that instates it in a fictional structure (Lacan, 2006a, 684).

The signifier introduces a split between Reality and Truth that defines precisely the locus of emergence of the subject of the unconscious. In order to show how the subject manifests itself in a feint, Lacan often cites the Freudian joke of the two Polish Jews where one asks the other in an offended tone: "Why are you telling me that you are going to Cracow, so that I'll think you're going to Lemberg, when you are really going to Cracow?" It is not only problematic to differentiate whether the statement "I'm going to Cracow" is true or false; what is much more shattering is the underlying feint that may occur even when the statement is proved to be exact. It is the same event that happens with the passage from a transparent mirror to a screen that hides something behind it; the problem of the statement "I'm going to Cracow" is not so much what it says, or whether such a statement defines an accurate state of things (after all, he really goes to Cracow), but rather the hole dug by the signifier within the exactness of the statement itself. There is a whole difference whether "I'm going to Cracow" is said to make you

understand that I'm going to Cracow, or whether it is said in order to make you believe that I'm going to Lemberg and therefore to deceive you. Here we can also see the difference between animal and human deception. An animal can feign to be something that he/she is not, but only a human being is capable of deceiving by means of telling the truth. Deceiving by feigning to deceive is profoundly different than feigning to deceive: it is only the former that suspends the ultimate guarantor of the *adequatio*; that recognizes the fact that there is no possible connection between the state of things and what it can believe to be a state of things. The subject of the unconscious dwells precisely in the difference between what is exact and what is true. The feint is situated in a different register which is not the enunciated content, but rather the enunciation that always implicates a reference to the Other as a guarantor of a truth which is separate from an exact mode of adequation. Implied here is the famous Lacanian claim regarding the conviction that "there is no Other of the Other," namely there is no ultimate substantial guarantor where truth can be reduced to an adequation of a state of things also is implied here.

Lacan's wager when introducing a concept such as the gaze was not so much to apply the dimension of truth to the subject of the signifier in the field of visual perception (which is the path followed by the majority of Lacanian oriented film studies scholars in the 70s, reducing the imaginary to the symbolic), but rather to individuate how this dimension of enunciation was implicated within the visual field itself. In other

words, the very separation between knowledge and truth operative at the level of the subject of the signifier can be transposed as a separation between the eye and the gaze in the visual experience (or between space as a visualizable and an imaginary entity, and space as a formalizable thought in the Real). The exactness of the statement and its dimension of truth, irreducible to each other, are implicated also in an image between the imaginary register of the image and its reference to truth. When in film studies we approach an image reducing it to its positive features, we unknowingly degrade it to the level of exactness; therefore imposing the model of the *adequatio rei et intellectus* and the “geometral optics” to a field, like vision, where the subject of desire is nevertheless internally present with its own specificities. The gaze represents, therefore, the dimension of enunciation implicated in the scopic field. An image, which in the imaginary (or in the dialectic of exactness and adequation) is looked at only regarding what it shows, with the irruption of the gaze considered also for what it hides behind. As with the statement “I’m going to Cracow” that can hide different intentions and strategies of deception, an image can hide different gazes and strategies of visualization. The paradoxical outcome would be that an identical image, if seen from the point of view of its visual exactness, can visualize a completely different constellation of visual desire at the level of the gaze.

We have to keep this theoretical analysis on the background when approaching Lacan’s interpretation of *Las Meninas* in a handful of sessions of Seminar XIII in

1965/1966. His primary task when interpreting this painting was in fact to highlight the irruption of the gaze and especially one of its specific incarnations in Velázquez's painting: the function of the window. But while doing that, and with a rhetorical strategy that is not uncommon in his seminars, Lacan covered his analysis with corollary details that were deceptive. For example, he claimed that the King and the Queen are not the main subjects of the painting. What seems to be an almost taken-for-granted element in the long history of the interpretation of *Las Meninas* is quickly discarded. The reasons? The dimensions of the painting – too large for a royal portrait –; the painter who would have been supposed to have painted himself having seen the whole scene of people around him in a mirror, and there are no testimonies to the fact that Velázquez was left-handed; the fact that if they really were in the position occupied by the spectator they should have been twice as small in the reflection in the mirror, for example. The reasons proposed by Lacan are far from convincing, but they definitely constitute a sign that what is mainly at stake in this interpretation is not its historical accuracy but its dimension of theoretical truth. When Lacan finally arrived at the core of his argument, namely the concept of the window, things start to become clearer:

It is in so far as the window, in the relationship of the gaze to the seen world is always what is elided, that we can represent for ourselves the function of the object *a*, the window, namely, just as much the slit between the eye lids, namely, just as much the entrance of the pupil, namely, just as much what constitutes this most primitive of all objects in anything concerned with vision, the camera obscura (la chambre noire) (Lacan, 1965-1966, lecture of 11 May 1966).

The window, very closely to Merleau-Ponty's idea of primary and material

vision, is the pure pre-subjective vision before it gets concretized in a series of objects and relations in the geometral dialectic. It is the pure condition of possibility of the event of vision like the opening of the eye lids, without any specific occurrences having yet taken place. Lacan borrows the terminology from an analysis of perspective developed in some of the previous lectures of the seminar, and this fact alone could already strike us as surprising given the bad name that perspective had obtained in film studies and visual studies in general. Renaissance perspective is usually used as a model of the disincarnated gaze, since the *camera obscura* was constructed around a single point of projection, and geometry, being an abstract science, is always and inevitably taken to be connected with an abstract subject.⁶ The most common accusation of perspective is the fact of relying on Cartesian binary thought, where the seeing/thinking subject (*res cogitans*) is reduced to an unsubstantial point while repressing and leaving on the background the implied *res extensa*, i.e. the bodily and carnal dimension of the spectator. But is Renaissance perspective really simply a variant of the “geometral optics” of the imaginary? With so many passages where Lacan moves his accusation against the reduction of optics to its imaginary counterpart, the pages dedicated to the study of perspective in Seminar XIII take a completely different direction. Lacan’s position reminds one very closely of Erwin Panofsky’s take on perspective in his *Perspective as*

⁶ An example of such an approach in film studies can be found in Crary, 1990. An effective critique of the latter approach is developed by Copjec 2000.

Symbolic Form (Panofsky, 1991) where he claims that the entire picture gets transformed into a “window,” and “we are meant to believe we are looking through this window into space” (Panofsky 1991, 27). This very fact alone would surprisingly put perspective much closer to a “screen” than to a “mirror,” especially since its visual pyramid – “where the apex of this pyramid is the eye” (Panofsky 1991, 28) – gives the idea of a subjective propagation much more than a linear system of connection, and the surrounding space – far from being neutralized – undergoes a significant projective bending. Perspective is, in fact, a highly ambiguous mechanism, a “two-edged sword” (Panofsky 1991, 67): it creates the possibility for the bodies to move plastically in space but, at the same time, enables light to spread out in space and in a painterly way dissolve the bodies; it creates a cold distance between human beings and things, but at the same time it also abolishes this distance by “drawing this world of things – an autonomous world confronting the individual – into the eye” (Ibid.). The mathematization of space is only relative, given that the objects in space are brought back to the individual and his/her psychophysical conditions of vision. The complete objectification overlaps with the complete annulment of distance of the things toward the Self. According to Panofsky, in fact, perspective signals the eclipse of theocracy and the beginning of “anthropocracy.” But Lacan is also fascinated by the heterogeneity between a mathematized space and a physiological one, and he does not fail to underline two of the most counterintuitive features of central perspective: the ability to

inscribe infinity – which is by definition unattainable by perception – within the limits of the frame; and the homogeneity of space composed by points which are “mere determinations of position, possessing no independent content of their own outside of this relation” (Panofsky 1991, 30). Lacan is therefore able, through the analysis of perspective, to merge together the libidinal determination of the object-gaze (in this case, the unsurpassable subjective side of the analysis of perspective, its un-realistic ground) in a highly abstracted and objectified space such as the one made possible by pure relational points. His main concern is not to criticize “geometral optics” for being too abstract and for not being able to entirely symbolize the experience of vision – if he had done that, he would have surrendered to another form of the metaphysics of presence, as Merleau-Ponty did with the incarnated dimension of vision. He wants to signal that the emergence of the gaze is possible only on the background of a structural-ized space. The gaze is an act of rupture in the imaginary notion of visual space, but it is not the emergence of a chaotic and un-representable reality in the field of an illusionary and abstracted notion of visual space. The gaze is actually the symptom of the break between the objective and formalised notion of space, and the highly subjectivized and libidinal one. It is, in other words, the incommensurability between space as a formalizable entity and space as a subjective experience of vision. The wager of the gaze and, in general, of psychoanalysis when confronting the visual field is precisely to be able to inhabit this distance and to transform it into a form of transmissible knowledge.

In his analysis of *Las Meninas*, Lacan tries to address precisely this dimension of the cut of the gaze through the notion of the scopic drive and the window: a register of enjoyment that should not, in any case, be reduced to a kind of biological evidence.

Lacan claims that in Velázquez's painting the subject of vision is in fact split between the signifiers and the interstitial space between them (which would stand as the variable *a*).

Borrowing the terminology from his reflection on perspective, he states that the window, the opening of the possibility of vision, gets concretized in a look that would be placed between the distance point and the vanishing point: the first is the projection of the subjective point of view on the horizon line, while the second is the movement of the latter distance along the horizon line. These two points (in the Lacanian algebra they would stand as $S_1 - S_2$) defines the place of the subject in the visual field as split in the same way as the subject of the signifier is split. The opening of the window (from which the subject of perspective should look from) indicates the pre-existence of vision in regard to the projected space (*a*). Lacan thus transposes this division among the elements of the paintings. He notes that Velázquez is inscribed twice: first in the position of the painter, and then as the man in front of the door when he is about to leave the room (they share the same name): they represent the S_1 and the S_2 of the split subject.

Between them the Infanta Margarita is the *object a* as what orients and attracts the gaze. These three elements would visualize in a metaphorical way the path of the scopic drive in its three constitutive moments.

First of all, we should premise that the logic of the Freudian drive is defined by its indecision, its vacillation between passive and active being; it is a register that is characterized for its overlapping of activity and passivity as if they were expressions of the same concept. In this regard, Eric Laurent noted regarding the dimension of drive in the scopic field:

Freud was not brought to isolate an object gaze, yet in the *Three Essays of the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905 he isolated voyeurism and exhibitionism which were grouped under the same sadism/masochism entry. While in the contemporary psychiatric treatise of Kraft Ebing, in its various editions, the two notions were separated, isolated, considered in themselves without being put in relation. Considering voyeurism and masochism under the same register was far from being evident. Freud justified this grouping in the name of the libidinal grammar, of the active/passive reversal (Laurent 1996, 35).

When libidinal economy is implicated in the scopic field it is impossible to reduce its dynamic to the interplay of active and passive and to the emergence of specific objects of relation. There is a primary dimension of visuality that is intransitive, such as the one symbolized by the a-subjective window before any elements of the visual field are even placed. Lacan therefore takes three of the characters of the paintings in order to construct the path of the drive in vision. The painter would represent the first moment, when the look is attracted by the object: he leaves the paintbrush, takes a step back from the canvas and turns his look toward the object. But, then, if we move a little bit on the right we see the Infanta Margarita: Lacan imagines that the little girl would say to us "let me see!" (but, in fact, thinking about what is on the other side of the picture). She does not pay attention to the *Meninas* who try to get her attention, she leans

slightly on the side as if she were trying to see what is behind. The third movement would involve the S2, the second Velázquez, who is at the door; Lacan imagines that he is about to leave the room. He saw it already, he has seen too much, "I'm leaving you." The three movements, therefore, would stand as the circular path of the drive in the scopical field. The drive does not aim at satisfying itself by achieving its goal; it is meant to remain structurally partial. That is why, paradoxically, its satisfaction morphs into its own impossibility, or – which is the flip side of the same coin – its partiality becomes a form of paradoxical satisfaction. The movement is circular, as it is closed in on itself. The problem is the point of the emergence of the circular path of drive, which is exactly the function of *a*: the window. And here Lacan introduces another *coup de théâtre*:

in a corner of the picture, through the picture itself, that is in a way turned onto itself in order to be represented in it, there is created this space in front of the picture which we are properly designated as inhabiting as such, this presentifying of the window in the look of the one who has put himself, not by chance, or in any random fashion in the place that he occupies, Velasquez, this is the point of capture and the specific action this picture exercises on us (Lacan, 1965-1966, lecture of 11 May 1966).

Lacan chooses to empty out the closed space created by the Foucauldian interpretation: there is a void in front of the representation, and it is this void that attracts the gaze. In a different fashion than Foucault, the diagonalization does not occur because of the dialectic between invisibility and visibility, but because of the object-ion caused by the remainder: *a*. A pure specular dialectic will always remain closed in on itself even at the visual level. The possibility to attract the gaze is created by the

appearance of the stain: exactly like the stain that Alice saw in the mirror at the beginning of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Lacan used, in this regard, a very precise Freudian term: *Vorstellungs-repräsentanz*. The objective of this term is probably Foucault himself: Velázquez does not make a reflection on the pure strategy of representation, and *Las Meninas* is not a painting about a disincarnated representation deprived of any material ground. The problem is the function of the window that gives the scopic field its libidinal ground which otherwise risks remaining in the background. The problem is the dissolution of vision in an interplay of signifiers, and the underestimation of a property of vision which is in an intransitive register and of its heterogeneity to “geometral optics.”

The Freudian reference can in this way clear many a misunderstanding. In the occurrence of a traumatic event, according to Freud, the affect that it was connected to is rejected and not assimilated: it is therefore transformed into somatic energy and as such morphed into a symptom. The representation, properly speaking, is repressed and became a signifier. When Freud used the term of *Vorstellungs-repräsentanz*, he indicated that there is a representative of representation that overlaps its representative content with its energetic and libidinal quantity. We have, therefore, two dimensions: a linguistic-qualitative one given by the representation content, but also a quantitative and libidinal one which is embodied by the somatic appearance of repression. We should thus highlight the economical register of this term that somehow got lost in the

translation of *repräsentanz* as representative, which almost inevitably indicates a register of the double, of specularity and representation. Freud defined “representative” as a desiring impulse. Jacques-Alain Miller even went so far as to claim that “*object a* is the Lacanian equivalent of the Freudian *Vorstellungs-repräsentanz*” (Miller 1998, 161).

What therefore interests Lacan, much more than the distribution of the places in the painting, and the dialectic between visibility and invisibility, is the dimension of the drive involved in the field of vision. The painting of a painting functions as a trap for the look, as a cause of the visual desire. If we think of the visual field independently from the objects involved and purely from the account of the energetic intensities, we will see that the traps for the look function as a lure in order to thicken conglomerates of visuality, whose phenomenological appearance is none other than the “let me see!” of the Infanta Margarita.

2.5. The Story of Zeuxis and Parrhasios

The passage from a mirror to a screen is the shift from vision understood by “geometral optics” to the minimal *trompe l’œil* effect where the eye is attracted by the opaqueness of a stain and the visual field is de-totalized and de-neutralized. In cinema it stands as the constant attempt to create a minimal ambiguous element within the frame in order to attract the scopic desire: this is also the reason why it is insufficient to reduce

the cinematographic event to a mere imaginary dialectic of identification without contemplating how it has to libidinally constitute itself as a trap for the eyes. A magnificent story about a *trompe l'œil* is the classical tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasios: the two painters – as it is reported by Pliny the Elder – who staged a contest to determine which of the two was a greater painter and a more realist depicter of reality. While Zeuxis depicted some grapes that were so realistically portrayed that even birds were deceived and attracted by them, Parrhasios outdid him by painting on the wall a veil so lifelike that Zeuxis himself turning toward him said: “Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it.” The moral of the story is that the subject of visual desire does want to be deceived; he does not want to see things along the model of the appropriate vision; he wants to stare at them in order to be deceived by the effect of the veil. As it was nicely formulated by Matteo Bonazzi: “Man loves sublimation, and thus for him the surprise is not so much to not find there in the picture the object that might have been able to satisfy his needs, but rather to find it as an object-veil; an object that while deceiving vision, does satisfy, so to speak, the gaze” (Bonazzi 2009, 111-112). The *object a* is therefore an occasion to be deceived and to approach as close as possible (but remaining just a small step before) the void of the Real. A subject of visual desire does not ask to be given the object of his need, but the object of his scopic desire, which, as it is always in Lacan regarding desire, emerges precisely in the background of an impossible satisfaction. The subject wants something that will never be given to him/her,

because s/he wants an image that does not exist as a discrete object in the world. It is an image that is consubstantial with a nothing because it does not have an adequate referent. When going to a movie a subject of visual desire knows perfectly well that what will be given to him/her will not appeal to his/her need, that the veil will never be completely taken away and that s/he will be brought back to a never-ending circular movement that is none other than the path of the drive. Lacan, in fact, reminds us that “if one wishes to deceive a man, what one presents to him is the painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it” (Lacan, 1978, 112).

This dimension of deceiving is what enables us to isolate the function of the signifier in the scopic field. It is because of the constant involvement of the cut that the frame that the mirror believes can be perfectly reflective starts, on the contrary, to refract and to introduce an element of diagonalization in the visual field. The dimension of the Two is not exclusive to language, it over-determines any form of relation also within vision and perception, given that according to Lacan there is no natural biology outside of the domain of the signifier. The effect of *trompe l'œil* has somehow a structural necessity in this way to make the subject believe in the beyond of the screen. But what would be the status of this belief in the “beyond”? Here some problems begin to emerge, which Joan Copjec articulates as follows:

What is being concealed from me? What in this graphic space does not show, does not stop not writing itself? This point at which something appears to be invisible, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation, some meaning left unrevealed, is the point of the Lacanian gaze. It marks the absence of a signified; it is an unoccupiable point, the point at which

the subject disappears. The image, the visual field, then takes on a terrifying alterity that prohibits the subject from seeing itself in the representation. That "belong to me aspect" is suddenly drained from representation, as the mirror assumes the function of a screen (Copjec 1989, 69).

We could say, with a play on words, that the point of this description of the gaze is the point. But it is also its problem. The dialectic is not so much between transcendence and immanence as Joan Copjec, later in the same text, seems to believe. The fact that the signifier conceals something, and that a subject of desire is therefore emerging from the unsubstantial interstitial space between the signifiers, is only one side of the coin. The other would be to avoid to re-inscribe this space in the structure in the space (or visual field) with the risk of an illegitimate re-ontologization. Joan Copjec somehow admits this much when she claims that "language's opacity is taken as the very cause of the subject's being, its desire" (Ibid.). The subject became the effect of the very impossibility to see the whole in the mirror and, therefore, emerges in the necessity of relying on the opaqueness of the deceiving gaze. If the gaze is the emergence of desire in the visual field, can we really conclude that the subject is "the *effect of the impossibility* [my emphasis] of seeing what is lacking in the representation" (Copjec 1989, 70)? The short-circuit between the impossibility of being to the being of impossibility can be a dangerous one, especially because it ends up placing the eternal problem of the foundation of the signifying chain in the Real. Despite the incalculable richness that the concept of gaze can still attain regarding an analysis of the visible that tends to fall back

inevitably to a sort of abstract universality, we should be extremely careful in resolving the problem of the subject of desire through the instituting character of *object a*.

Otherwise, the act of deceiving made possible by the *object a* becomes reassuring: what we throw out of the window as the imaginary reenters through the front door in the guise of the Real.

In order to de-substantialize the concept of *a* we first have to underline what is probably its most important character, which is its impossible localizability. That is why the gaze is never a point. The opaqueness of the screen, or the look that the object gives back to us cannot be treated as literal appearances of the object. They are, rather, subjective manifestations of anxiety, they are the affect that reveals in a rather indirect way the inconsistency of the One of the imaginary. In this way, even though it might seem paradoxical, the gaze can never be a visual occurrence, not even in the form of a *trompe l'œil*, at least if we understand a *trompe l'œil* as a visual trick to be detected *in* the visual field itself, and not as a subjective form of appearance or anxiety as it should be. In the very moment when the gaze can be detected as a property of the visual, it inevitably falls back to a certain form of imaginary which is by definition doomed to be haunted by the dialectic of specularità. The gaze is the rather paradoxical phenomenon of an occurrence that, while happening in the visual field, does not have a visual appearance. This is the reason why a treatment through examples, because every one of them will entail, as abstract as they might be, a minimal form of imaginary.

Lacan is somehow split in the development of Seminar XI between the necessary examples that have to be brought in order to explain the concept of *object a*, and the theoretical axiom of the split between the eye and the gaze that makes the emergence of the latter impossible in the imaginary. A good example of this point is given when Lacan mentions the question of the gaze in Sartre:

The gaze, as conceived by Sartre, is the gaze by which I am surprised—surprised in so far as it changes all the perspectives, the lines of force, of my world, orders it, from the point of nothingness where I am, in a sort of radiated reticulation of the organisms. [...] The gaze sees itself—to be precise, the gaze of which Sartre speaks, the gaze that surprises me and reduces me to shame, since this is the feeling he regards as the most dominant. The gaze I encounter—you can find this in Sartre's own writing—is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other. If you turn to Sartre's own text, you will see that, far from speaking of the emergence of this gaze as of something that concerns the organ of sight, he refers to the sound of rustling leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting, to a footstep heard in a corridor (Lacan 1978, 84).

We could condense this passage in the formula “the gaze is not seen,” it cannot be perceived with the eyes, and nevertheless it belongs to the domain of the visual. This is also one of the reasons why the application of the concept of gaze into film analysis inevitably risks losing the most crucial core of the concept, reducing it to a sort of neutral hermeneutic tool.

On the other hand, we have to confront the problem of the obverse risk of transcendentalization of *object a*. Given that its mode of appearance is always inevitably doomed to fall back to some sort of imaginary, its status should be left in an almost ineffable description, according to which its materialization would be always not only

partial, but also defective if confronted to its higher degree of being.

2.6. Politics of Formalization

A good antidote to such a religious turn in Lacanianism when confronting the status of *object a* is provided by Slavoj Žižek. At first it would seem that the impossibility of reducing the object to a specific mode of appearance would clash with Žižek's style of argumentation, where the constant use of external references somehow marked his mode of writing; making some consider him the perfect incarnation of a "philosophy of exemplifications." But nothing in fact could be further from the truth. Bruno Bosteels has recently and accurately reconstructed the different shifts and changes in Žižek's work regarding the development of the concept of the "act" (a procedure at the core of Žižek's rhetorical strategy in general). While it would seem that his work is ever-circular, repeating over and over again the same examples, and sticking impossibly and stubbornly to a somehow narrow set of concepts, what he in fact accomplishes is to make these very concepts undergo small, yet significant, theoretical shifts. Such a process occurs and develops in his many and frequent publications, but can also occur in the space of the same book, where a concept is used in different and sometimes even conflicting manners. Far from being the sign of a sort of theoretical pluralism, where a concept would be recognized for its slippage and possibly multifarious meanings, Žižek

combines this rhetorical strategy with the “dogmatic stopping point” according to which all the manifestations of the same concept are precisely not contradictory. Bosteels claims, regarding the concept of the act, that “we are expected to make sense of the opposing intonations of the act all at once and simultaneously” (Bosteels 2011, 194). The multiplicity and contradictory manifestations of the same concept are performatively knit together by a declaration of doctrinal consistency.

Were we to take away these references to Hegel or Lacan, Žižek’s ruminations on our contemporary social order would collapse into a jumble of half-journalistic and half-conceptual jottings; more importantly, he would not be able to dislocate the expectations of his readers or provoke an internal shift or displacement of our current ideological framework, since he would just be adding a few more sound bites to the liberal-ironic conversation of humanity (Bosteels 2011, 194).

The different manifestations of the same concept are therefore dogmatically unified by their reference to the same stopping point. Even though it is not easy to distinguish the Žižekian “half-journalistic and half-conceptual jottings” from the system he claims it to be, the difference, albeit minimal, is nonetheless crucial. It is precisely the dogmatic reference that makes all these otherwise metonymical differences find a center of orientation that, despite its being void – not positively articulable – is precisely what makes a difference. It is not a coincidence that Žižek also used this rhetorical strategy in order to tackle the concept of *object a* or the Real in Lacan given that those concepts precisely manifest such a dialectical consistency. Žižek knows that a single representation of *object a* would entail an illegitimate substantializing short-circuit, but precisely because of that, he does know that the very emergence of the plurality of its

possible representations are not tentative examples in order to manifest its somehow transcendental status, but are rather the direct mode of appearance (*erscheinen*) of the concept itself.

It is for the same reason that Lacan refers to the Freudian idea of “partial object” in order to conceptualize the gaze. It cannot, in fact, be reduced to a certain categorical representation, but is doomed to be detected only in partial manifestations. The true theoretical deadlock is the reason why these different concrete manifestations appear themselves as parts and not as plural and different concrete “things” of the world. In other words, why are these manifestations not several individuated elements in the imaginary, were they partial-ized thus indicating a register that is somewhat resistant to the imaginary?

An *object (a)*, such as the gaze, is defined as being a non-categorical object. This means that representations of it do exist, but they are many and a certain inequality reigns among them (Sciacchitano 2005). They do not constitute a set that can become an element of another set with the totality of its representations. As stated by Freud: “partial drives [...] are not without objects, but those objects do not necessarily converge into a single object” (Freud, 1916-1917, 327). The problem is therefore how to deal with the infinite representations of this slipping function, knowing that its localization is dispersed in a multiplicity of contradictory positions. The problem is thus not how to “make One” out of them, something that would make us fall back either to an imaginary

unity or to the transcendental as an unfathomable outside. Psychoanalysis, in this respect, goes in neither of these directions but, rather, tries to elaborate a path of formalization, which would entail the possibility of transmissible knowledge and its elaboration.

Thus psychoanalysis, as one of the many ways to experience an encounter with such an object, should ask itself whether it will go in the direction of the singularization of the object, where a subject tries to accommodate the impossible universality of the mode through which he entertains his phantasy; or whether it would be possible to risk the path of a potential formalization of this encounter, knowing that a formal knowledge needs to be re-thought and re-invented in order to make this act of transmission possible. Cinema until now, or any practice in the production of images, took the first path, trying to evoke and to incarnate a gaze in the singularity of its own eventual relationship with the object. But what if images would not try to incarnate the solution of the encounter with an object, but rather activate a more profound cut? Where any possibility for the imaginary to be re-sutured after the appearance of *object (a)* would be discarded as unacceptable? What if the appearance of the gaze that cinema also makes possible engendered a practice of constituting a new form of transmissible knowledge where the radical singularity of the object would be taken as an opportunity, and not as a ground, for a possible solution? What if a new relation between images and science were still possible?

3. The Formalization of the Moving-Image

3.1. *The Three Gazes*

How can cinema deal with the asymmetrical intrusion of the gaze that objects to the unifying operation of the One in the visual field? How can it inhabit the split between the visual as an experience in the imaginary and the visual as a thought independent from our eyes as it is formalized, for example, by non-euclidean geometries? We saw that the gaze can be understood at least in three different ways. It can function as an element of opaqueness inside the image as we saw in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* where the mirror starts suddenly to expose an ambiguous stain. In this case, we have the reduction of the gaze to an intruder that breaks the equilibrium of the frame and eventually puts the spectator in a position of anxiety. There is a widespread understanding of the gaze in film studies, for example, as an element of intrusion considered heterogeneous to the ideological or formal constellation that defines the film (or image) under analysis. It is a definition of gaze that still maintains the flaw of a successful localization of itself therefore confusing object as it is defined in psychoanalysis as *object (a)* with concretely existing objects as correlates of desire. The gaze, in fact, is not another point inhabiting the visual space.

Secondly, the gaze can function as a trajectory of scopic desire. We saw this definition of the gaze mentioned by Lacan in the study of perspective in *Seminar XIII* or in the analysis of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* where, from a concrete object in the visual field, this concept is translated into the libidinal economy as a force that transforms the Newtonian abstract space of visual perception into a field of intensities. As in topology, where a figure can be stretched and folded as long as it is not cut, vision ceases to be an arrow as in geometral optics; it no longer connects two points in a Euclidean space but, rather, starts to define a qualitative curvature and fold of space as a whole. We also have to remember that the gaze is one of the figures through which Lacan addresses the particular logic of the drive: a force that is defined by having no terminal point or end and is seen as a desiring energy that does not seek any achievement. It does not have any aim or goal other than its own self-reflective and circular movement. It is easy to imagine such a figure if we remain in the context of geometral optics where an arrow, instead of connecting an active and passive polarity, begins to move erratically without ever finding a definitive conclusion to its movement. But in a non-Euclidean space, in order to visualize what we understand as drive it can be extremely difficult if not utterly impossible. Here we encounter a limit regarding this second definition. When touching the point where, in order to understand gaze in the visual field, we have to abandon the possibility of visualization itself, the biggest temptation is to translate the concept into some sort of biological transparency as it is with the term *jouissance*, or enjoyment.

Despite having an evident clinical effectiveness, this term addresses only a part of the problem and it risks reducing the concept of the gaze or *object (a)* to some sort of psychological evidence on par with a metaphysics of presence. The gaze, in this way, loses all its speculative specificity in order to be limited to a kind of “symptomatic experience” (a formulation whose ambiguity should be evident at this point). The asymmetry of gaze thus would be no different than any other lived experience of visual hallucination or inconsistency in the visual field. But inconsistencies of the visual sense (or of any other senses) are not something specific to the Freudian discovery: they are part of a long tradition of debates in the field of philosophical empiricism or epistemology in general. If the gaze were strictly limited to an inner psychological or bodily experience of death drive, or to an empirical inconsistency of the senses, there would be no reason to reserve for this concept any kind of privilege in the description of the Real.

Therefore it is important to move the understanding of the concept of the gaze to another more advanced stage: a way that keeps some of the insights given by the idea of the gaze as an intruder that breaks the consistency of the visual field as a correlate object of vision, but also that is aware of the fact that it is an object in a very peculiar way. It is in fact an object only in the precise and peculiar sense that is thought by psychoanalysis, where objectuality is not the name of a concretely existing being in the world but, rather, a principle of asymmetry that superimposes the totality of the visual field, making it

impossible to be formed imaginarily as in the experience of human vision. Non-Euclidean geometries starting from the nineteenth century proposed a different formalization of space indebted neither to the abstractedness of Newtonian space connected with experience, nor to the pure intuition of space as with the Kantian transcendental subject. What Lacan called “the split between the gaze and the eye” meant, first and foremost, that there was a separation between visual space as an experience and visual space as a thought. Space was not only meant to be visualized, but also dealt with in an abstract and mathematical way that did not require it to be actually seen by the eyes. The anti-substantialist perspective brought forward by scientists such as Gauss, Reimann and Lobachevsky was aimed at constructing geometrical models that were not meant to match an already given reality. Realism in the sciences does not mean to search for an immediate correspondence with correlated phenomena. Those models characterized by a high degree of abstraction were not pure analytical constructions, they did in fact have a purchase on the Real. When Reimannian geometry at the beginning of the twentieth century, almost fifty years after Reimann’s death, became a fundamental brick in order for Einstein to build his theory of general relativity it became clear that non-Euclidean geometries actually allowed for a further knowledge of space not constrained in the limited boundaries of human senses and perceptual schema.

Geometry, or any kind of formalization of space, therefore are not too abstract if compared to a supposed “real” space modeled on our perception of it; it might be, on

the contrary, that they are not abstract enough if they are not ready to abandon the human-being unit of measure according to which space is just the abstract background of experiences. Space is a much wider entity than the visualizable part of it. It is here that we become aware of how extremely valuable the Lacanian thought of the visual can be. Not in the way it was developed in the 70s along the dividing lines between the imaginary and the symbolic; and not even as a method of film analysis, to find the object-gaze as an heterogeneous element with psychoanalysis (which here is, in fact, nothing more than psychology) applied to the filmic text. Lacan understood that “the visual” is not only what is “out there” in order to be seen. “The visual” or space, is a much more complex and broader phenomenon. It can express itself as the imaginary when discrete objects constitute it, and when the relations between those objects are based on the geometral optics of activity and passivity. But there is a dimension of the visual that is highly counter-intuitive and goes much further than simply referring to the eyes as phenomenological correlate of its experience.

3.2. A Vision of the Universal

The gaze as an intruder in the filmic text (and the correlate affect of anxiety eventually produced in the spectator) and the gaze as subjective experience of scopic *jouissance* are two different modalities through which the consistency of the visual field

as geometral optics is cut. In the correlation of the subject and object of vision, the cut concerns, first, the object (for example the filmic text) while, second, it concerns the experience of the subject involved (the scopic desire). But what Lacan understood was that these two moments are intertwined together (or knotted as Lacan would say) in a third: the Real of vision as heterogeneous from the imaginary. It would be interesting to ask ourselves at this point: what would be the different ways to deal with this third register, the visual space not as it is perceived, but as Real? Non-Euclidean geometries exemplify a way to deal with it through a procedure of mathematical formalization. But what about psychoanalysis? If we limit its scope to the mere individual clinical experience, it would mean to have, at best, an experience of the Real of vision from the subjective pole of the correlation. The world of Art, and therefore cinema, would be on the other hand a way to deal with the emergence of the cut of the gaze within the limits of the field of the imaginary (therefore without properly questioning the geometral optics of the relation among discrete unities under the law of the One). But Lacan's supposition was that psychoanalysis was not only a practice of interrogation of the unconscious on a pure individual basis but, rather, a way, at least if not to resolve, to address the problem of the relation between singularity, what pertains to a single unconscious, and universality, what pertains to knowledge in its general transmissibility.⁷ The imaginary visual field can only take into account the particularity of

⁷ An example of Lacan's research on the transmissibility of the analytical knowledge was the elaboration of

the different and non-exchangeable points of view. We see from only one point of view different for each and every one of us, which depends on the specific position of our eyes in space. We become discrete unities only under the law of the One whose most prominent consequence in the field of the unconscious is the creation of the Ego. And we saw that it is only through the image of the Ego that the very boundaries of individuals are affirmed. But if, as proven by the many achievements in the non-Euclidean geometries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a formalization of space is possible even beyond the strict boundaries of the phenomenological visual experience, it means that it is possible to have a dimension of space that is unrelated to experience (and therefore particularity) and rather related to thought (and therefore universality).

Psychoanalysis in this way, if it is not reduced to mere psychology (a practice of the elimination of the symptom at the service of the social norm), can actually have quite an important role in such a process. Psychoanalysis has always been extremely attentive to the issue of the transmissibility of the unconscious after the end of an analytical experience, a movement that could be considered similar to the transition from a particular perception of reality to a universal formalization of the Real.

the concept of *passer*: the procedure of (self) authorisation in order for an analysand to become an analyst and therefore to mark the end of an analysis. It was a procedure that tried to circumvent the impossibility for an analytical experience to be reduced to a pure universal knowledge (as it is the discourse of the University) without renouncing the possibility of making it communicable and transmittable. See Jacques Lacan *Proposition du 9 Octobre 1967 sur la psychanalyse de l'École* in Lacan 2001.

A symptom, the beginning of every psychoanalysis, is defined as a point of emergence of the unconscious within a body. The supposition that a symptom does contain a knowledge (facilitated by transference) should be understood as a bodily knowledge and not as a knowledge transmitted at the level of the imaginary (Lacan would call the latter “the discourse of the University” where knowledge is transmitted without the participation of the subject but through the subjection of the subject). Psychoanalysis serves several purposes: intervening at this point of emergence to produce increasingly new unconscious material; morphologically manipulating this symptom in order to make it more sustainable for the analysand; but also, and concerning our analysis crucially, making this symptom something transmittable within the psychoanalytic community, and therefore ideally making it something that relates to each and every one of us. Rendering what is bodily inscribed universally transmittable might sound self-contradictory. How can something that is related to a single mode of enjoyment become relevant outside the limits of a body? Here we touch a fundamental and rather critical dilemma for psychoanalysis. Is it a practice that regards an experience (and therefore the incarnated dimension of it)? Or does it regard a thought? Is the unconscious a point of unsurpassable singularity? Or is it possible to form it, through the analytical experience, into something different and possibly universal?

The body, as it understood in the imaginary, is what is circumscribed by the limits of the narcissistic image under the law of the One. But the enjoying body that

Freud discovered in the libidinal economy is very different and cannot overlap with the former. The diagonal intrusion of libido makes the subject not fully in control of his/her own body. Every practice of enjoyment, even in the most balanced and controlled way, exposes the incorporation of death drive in the living body, therefore making it something more or something less than the narcissistic image provided in an illusionary fashion by the Ego. That is why every human being has to construct his/her own single relation with a body, minimally un-identifying himself/herself with it. We can thus say that a psychoanalytic practice, given that it is directed toward the symptom and its bodily substance, is first and foremost a construction of a body. So how would it be possible to make this bodily incarnated knowledge something at the disposal of everyone? How would it be possible to elevate enjoying matter to the level of a thought?

What is extremely interesting in the formalization of space elaborated by Gauss or Riemann is that it is far from a reduction of the concreteness of space to the level of abstract and idealistic mathematical formula. What Lacan showed us through his reflection on the visual articulated between the registers of the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real is that the most ideological, illusionary and deceiving dimension of visuality is without any doubt the one given by the imaginary. Which is also, and not by coincidence, the closest to our experience of reality. Psychoanalysis thus arrived at the following shattering conclusions: what is furthest from the subject is the Ego, what is purely incorporated from outside, is the narcissism of the Self. The body of the

imaginary is a nothing more than an imagined body, in the double sense of made by the stuff of an image and totally constructed by an imagination distant from the Real. It is only when approaching the most audacious forms of the mathematical formalization of space through topology, intrinsic geometry, and n -dimensional spaces that we come close to a possible universalization, not to mention faithful to the Real, of the dimension of space. In this way both psychoanalysis and science share the same conviction regarding the counter-intuitive dimension of the Real: between the spontaneous experience of space, and the most mathematized forms of geometrical formalization, abstractedness lies with the former, while realism with the latter. The gaze, no matter if its point of emergence (or cut) can occur in the imaginary, in a filmic text, or in a practice of analysis, can in any case become the door through which, by initiating a practice of the counter-intuitive abandonment of the geometral optics of the imaginary, can begin to approach space for what it really is: something far larger than what spontaneous perception makes us believe it to be.

3.3 Cinema and the Machine

A certain question now becomes inevitable: what role can cinema play in an understanding of space, which through the opening-up of the gaze, became something far larger than what human visual perception habitually experiences? Is cinema, and

visual art in general, condemned to the strict boundaries of the imaginary? Would it be possible for movement-images to emancipate themselves from being correlated to the human experience of space? Or is cinema only a practice to domesticate and suture the gaze to the narrow limits of the screen?

On the one hand, the answer is easy: indeed cinema produces images that are meant to be seen by human beings, therefore objects that are destined to be experienced in the field of the imaginary. Cinema is also by definition phantasmatic (Bellavita 2006), it is intended to be framed by a relation with the phantasy of the spectator. Therefore by his/her scopic desire, by his/her visual enjoyment. But the boundaries of this vision have an unsurpassable point of localization.

Cinema has to be desired to be seen, therefore it has to trigger the scopic desire of the spectator; it has to create a minimal stain of opaqueness that captures the eye of the spectator to what is happening on the screen. As with *Alice*, the spectator has to be driven by "THAT bit" that awakens curiosity and cultivates desire to unfold the film on the screen until the very end. But this desire is opposed to an antagonistic movement: the fact that it has a very specific place of localization, which is enclosed in a few meters (or less) that define the boundaries of the screen (be it a television, a movie theatre, a 3-D Imax or a cell phone). The Lacanian *object (a)* of the gaze with its impossible localization and its libidinally infinite trajectory finds, in the end, a place to rest in the screen. The drive ends in a goal. The opaqueness becomes transparent; the screen becomes a mirror.

The *object (a)* becomes a really existing object of a world. Is the fate of cinema regarding “the visual” therefore sealed?

We should not jump too quickly to such a conclusion. Jacques Rancière, for example, underlined with a very penetrating argument (Rancière, 2006) how the history of cinema has always been traversed by a conflict between activity and passivity, between the ordered actions of the Aristotelian “fable” orchestrated by script-writers and directors, and the mute recordings of a mechanical camera where images are freed from the anxiety of signification and expose their pictorial and intransitive dimension. It is a topic that has a considerable tradition in the history of film theory. For example, it was widely addressed by Gilles Deleuze according to whom one of the most powerful resources of the cinematographic art lies precisely in this banal, but nevertheless crucial, technological means: the point of view of the camera never perfectly overlaps with the human eye of the director. Cinema was born with the possibility of a mechanical way of recording the events of the world from a point of view not occupied by any real existing human being. This is an event of tremendous consequences for representation and the possibility to think visual space. Vision is no longer exclusively experienced with the eyes of a human being, it can be seen from the point of view of a mechanical and purposeless camera. According to Deleuze (1986 and 1989), this fact alone puts cinema at an advantage if compared to painting or other visual arts where the point of view of the work of art cannot but overlap with the look of the artist. In cinema, we have a

partial similarity with what Lacan defined as the split between the eye and the gaze (though only related to the first of the three definitions of gaze):

Cinematographic automatism settles the quarrel between art and technique by changing the very status of the "real." It does not reproduce things as they offer themselves to the gaze. It records them as the human eye cannot see them, as they come into being, in a state of waves and vibrations, before they can be qualified as intelligible objects, people, or events due to their descriptive and narrative properties (Rancière, 2006, 2).

Against a classical regime of art (what Rancière called the mimetic regime) that revolves around the question of representation, and that understands artistic activity on the model of an active form that imposes itself upon inert matter and subjects it to its representational ends, the development of cinema is the sign of an aesthetic shift. Its specificity is a potential passivity. It has the possibility to record something against any creative agency; there will always be something more, something different, something unexpected if compared to what the director was planning to put in the frame. Among all the arts, cinema is in fact probably the one that controls the least its own material, because unlike novelists and painters, who are themselves the agents of their becoming-passive, the camera cannot be but passive. Rancière, however, moves the analysis from technical device to the underlying idea of an implicated art that defines the regime of art proper to cinema as aesthetic, describing it as a Hegelian identity of opposites: a unity of active and passive, thought and non-thought, intentional and unintentional. Art in modernity, and cinema in particular, is no longer the act of power of a transparent subject modeled on the Ego, but rather a "thought that abdicates the attributes of will

and loses itself in stone, in color, in language, and equals its active manifestation to the chaos of things" (Rancière 2006, 117). Cinema has the power to expropriate the Ego and reduce it to the inert matter of things.

3.4. Deleuze and becoming-passive

In the history of confrontation between activity and passivity, a conflict among the different ideas of art also took place. While the impersonal camera tends to go spontaneously toward the inner matter of things, the traditional and mimetic subject of art always tries to subjugate the former to the prerogatives of representation (i.e. to the imaginary). Such a conflict can effectively be rearticulated in terms of a proper aesthetic quandary. While many theoreticians tried to found the cinematographic art on its own technical apparatuses, it was only through a certain idea of art that it was possible to negotiate how those technical devices will eventually be transposed in a concrete production of sensible experience. The technological possibility for a camera passively to record the pure writing of light ended up being founded on the aesthetic novelistic model of the nineteenth century: after more than a century it is quite easy to guess who was the winner among those two traditions. According to Jean-Luc Godard in *Histoire(s) du Cinema*, cinema during the development of its own history ended up betraying its own pictorial and figural potentiality in order to accommodate written scripts derived

from literary tradition. It became an illustration of an Other that ended up subjecting images to its own will. The mimetic Aristotelian *fabula* won out over the intransitive passivity of the image of modernity. Signification and articulation derived from language took over what Deleuze defines as the sterility of images, the fact that they do not represent anything. And therefore the master controller and demiurge of the director managed to orientate the connection between images toward the production of an illustration of a written text.

Deleuze called the connection between images aimed at the expression of signification a sensory-motor schema, a rationality that put images in a series where every element is linked with another one and where every action has to be completed with a re-action. The outcome is a form of connection not dissimilar from a signifying chain, where every ring is defined precisely by not being self-sufficient and therefore in need of being articulated with another one. The consequence of such an idea of cinema is deeply counter-intuitive and somehow paradoxical: the effect of reality that we feel when we go to a movie theatre is not given by the fact that images are none other than records of light stimuli placed on a material support (a faithful and non-manipulated depiction of reality). Actually, this *écriture* of light in its pure form should cause quite the opposite effect: a reality as it could have never been witnessed by our eyes, a space no longer at the command of our narcissistic imaginary, a world as it would have never been possible by the means of our own limited visual perception. The camera would be

able, according to Deleuze, to free perception from the strict and narrow boundaries of the synthetic brain that tends inevitably to reduce the disorder of the Real into the binary structures of transcendent meaning. Jean-François Lyotard made a similar argument regarding the concept of movement that in the sensory-motor schema gains sense only when articulated and exchangeable with something else:

Every movement put forward sends back to something else, is inscribed as a plus or a minus on the ledger book which is the film, is valuable because it returns to something else, because it is thus potential return and profit. The only genuine movement with which the cinema is written is that of value. The law of value (in so-called "political" economy) states that that object, in this case movement, is valuable insofar as it is exchangeable for other objects and in terms of equal quantities of a definable unity (for example, quantities of money) (Lyotard 1978, 54).

The narrative structure of a series of images is therefore based on their potential exchangeability. They are put on the same level and articulated in a multiplicity of Ones where meaning is produced as a sum of the totality of its elements. Meaning and its representational byproduct are the consequences of a quantification of the different images, and therefore of the repression of their singularity. The effect of reality in narrative cinema is therefore not a consequence of the potentiality of the camera to record the world as it is, but rather the outcome of its ruthless repression. When cinema is bound to the sensory-motor schema of action-reaction, of meaning production and quantitative sum it means that the camera is turned to silence, that its potential passivity has been enslaved by the prerogatives of the activity of the director. With an in-human device such as the camera, its use as an instrument in the faithful reproduction of reality

ends up being all too human, in the sense of accommodating the unit of measure to phenomenological visual perception. Thus the gaze is superimposed once again with the eye and the wound of their split definitively healed.

Nevertheless in a history of missed encounters and unfulfilled potentialities, there are moments, usually despite the will of directors and producers, script-writers and photographers, when the sensory-motor links leave room for the meaninglessness and intransitivity of the pure *écriture* of light, for the passive sterility of what Deleuze would call the infinite virtuality of the image, when an image breaks the linguistic link of the filmic articulation and expresses its own inner infinity. In the words of Jean Epstein (also mentioned by Jacques Rancière):

Cinema, by and large, doesn't do justice to the story. And "dramatic action" here is a mistake. The drama we're watching is already half-resolved and unfolding on the curative slope to the crisis. The real tragedy is in suspense. It looms over all the faces; it is in the curtain and in the door-latch. Each drop of ink can make it blossom at the tip of the pen. It dissolves itself in the glass of water. At every moment, the entire room is saturated with the drama. The cigar burns on the lip of the ashtray like a threat. The dust of betrayal. Poisonous arabesques stretch across the rug and the arm of the seat trembles. For now, suffering is in surfusion. Expectation. We can't see a thing yet, but the tragic crystal that will turn out to be at the center of the plot has fallen down somewhere. Its wave advances. Concentric circles. It keeps on expanding, from relay to relay. Seconds. The telephone rings. All is lost. Is whether they get married in the end really all you want to know? Look, really, THERE IS NO film that ends badly, and the audience enters into happiness at the hour appointed on the program. Cinema is true. A story is a lie (Epstein 1974, 86).

Epstein considers cinema as something other than the illustration of story, as if they were two opposing principles. And despite any development of a story, the moments truly faithful to the passivity of the camera are the ones beyond the agency of

the *fabula* (and its intercessor, the director): in the curtain, in the door-latch, in every drop of ink, in the glass of water. At the interstices of the sensory-motor links a symptomatic and proper cinematographic emergence is ready to pop up. Deleuze will find those traces of passivity in what he called the “pure optical and sound situations” as they can be found, for example, in Rossellini when the ambiguities of the Real create discontinuities in the rationality of the sensory-motor links. But those cuts, those moments when the gaze emerges in the consistency of the visual, signify a possible crisis of the constitution of the visual as reduced to the imaginary and to the law of the One. In order to make this crisis visible, it is necessary for the narrative story to be emptied out from within by those moments of pure pictorial breaks.

Within the development of cinema as a form of art we can find, transposed, the conflict between the activity proper to the imaginary where the Ego believes to be in charge of its own visual perceptions, and the cut of the *object (a)* that re-articulates the totality of the correlation of subject and object in the visual perception in terms of crisis. The dialectical relation between activity and passivity, the sensory-motor links’ articulations and pure optical images, the narrative’s meaning and sterile interruptions, all are part of the internalization of a wider problem concerning the visual as a whole within the field of movement-images: what we saw as the split between space as visualizable and space as thought. Nevertheless, it seems premature to give credit to Rossellini as having been capable of achieving the materialization of the crisis of the

imaginary in his own films and, eventually, even of having been able to expose cinematographically to the otherwise in-visualizable gaze.

For every act of passivity there is always a corresponding activity that tries to obliterate it. How in fact would be possible actively to leave room for an expropriating passivity? Is it possible from within a certain filmic poetic, from a certain directing style, to be the willing agency of a becoming-passive? To be the agency of his/her own eclipse of being an agency? In the fight between the director and the machine, how would it possible for the director to leave it to the camera to win without faking the game?

Deleuze tried to oppose the logic of automatic impersonality to the conscious idealistic subject of representation: a proper aesthetic affect, according to him, must surprise the subject of art from behind, making his prerogatives of organizing sensibility lose to the machine. Usually Deleuze uses the term subject as a synonym of what we have called the Ego, the individual in the field of the imaginary when the law of the One is successfully inscribed. Against the latter, a true form of aesthetic subjectivity emerges only on the background of impersonal machinic forces when automatic passivity breaks through at the expense of the hypocritical voluntarism of conscious individuality. As Alain Badiou said, regarding Deleuze:

For we are dealing here with the conditions of thought and these are a matter of purification, sobriety, and a concentrated and lucid exposure to immanence [...]. We must, through the sustained renunciation of the obviousness of our needs and occupied positions, attain that empty place where, seised by impersonal powers, we are constrained to make thought exist through us. [...] Thinking is not the spontaneous effusion of a personal capacity. It is the power, won only with the greatest difficulty against oneself, of being constrained to the world's

play (Badiou, 1999, 11).

According to Deleuze, thinking in the visual field does not mean artificially elaborating an effective and proper image. For a philosopher extremely attentive to creating concepts, and who believes that cinema did not need an outside to be explained because it was fully able to create its own thoughts, it might be surprising to hear that art is not about creation, but rather about the power to go against oneself. But the problem lies precisely in the notion of the subject: going against the individual of the imaginary so that the impersonal and passive gaze (the true dimension of subjectivity) emerges.

In the visual field, this means that the prerogatives of the subject of vision in the imaginary have to collapse at the expense of the gaze: the visual activity of the narcissistic human being has to leave room for the impersonal cut of what Lacan called *object (a)*. The individual looking at things following the model of geometrical optics, where vision is an arrow connecting two things in an abstract background, needs to be open to the inert passivity of the in-human camera. In his book on Bacon, Deleuze writes that art should not aim at appealing to the subject, but rather to perturb its mode of existence. The organization of its body needs to become unsettled, the organs let loose from their function ("the flesh falling from the bones," he writes). Deleuze believes that art should be, first and foremost, a "catastrophe." It is only through a radical questioning of an individual mode of existence that a cut within the consistency of the

imaginary constitution of the Ego can occur. But how would it be possible to have such a masochistic subjective emergence at the expense of the Ego without ultimately re-inscribing a dissimulated willing on the part of the latter? How would it be possible to force the limits of one's own mode of existence if the act of forcing comes from within this very mode of existence? It would seem in this way that the gaze cannot but come from a transcendent outside, leaving cinema at best a locus of contingent emergence, without having any privilege in being able to evoke the gaze through its own inner resources.

Deleuze, in his analysis of Bresson, considered the portrait of hands as a metaphor of the power of montage: the active operation, *par excellence*, in cinematic production. It is montage that best exposes the duality between the will of the artist in his manipulative handling of images and the autonomous passive recording of the camera. There is therefore a split in the production of moving-images between the hand of the director/editor and the mechanical eye of the camera that re-inscribes within the boundaries of the screen the non-rapport between the eye and the gaze in the constitution of the visual field. It is a matter of making the eye to collapse in order to make room for the emergence of the gaze; of making the hand of montage to refrain from subjecting the passivity of images to its own will. The solution that Deleuze proposes is a negotiation of the non-relation between these two opposing principles, a way in order to inhabit creatively their inevitable split. In the words of Jacques Rancière:

Deleuze subverts the old parable of the blind and the paralytic: the filmmaker's gaze must become tactile, must become like the gaze of the blind, who coordinate the elements of the visible world by groping. And, conversely, the coordinating hand must be the hand of a paralytic. It must be seized by the paralysis of the gaze, which can only touch things from afar, but never grasp them (Rancière, 2006, 119).

This solution, theoretically elegant as it may be, ends up being incomplete and unsatisfactory regarding the fundamental non-rapport that we have outlined so far. Cinema, especially because of the mechanical passivity at the core of its idea of art, and central for its technical apparatus, can constitute a privileged evental site for the appearance of the gaze in the visual arts. Its awareness of the deep dialectical relation between activity and passivity makes it – as effectively developed by Jacques Rancière – a particularly modern form of art. Some episodes in its history reveal a profound sensibility regarding the rupturing effect of the gaze and its heterogeneity with the imaginary constitution of the visual. Hitchcock, for example, boasted that he never looked through the eye of a camera; Jean-Marie Straub when explaining his work on the *decoupage* claimed that it was aimed at “erasing any trace of intention” (Spila 2001). Many directors have as their most stubborn objective to make this surprising passivity emerge in the texture of the film. But there is little or no doubt that any cinematographic choice, as refined as it may be, will end up resuturing this passivity on the surface of a screen. The emergence of the gaze made possible by the traumatic passivity of the camera is always counter-acted by an inevitable localization, which is ironically enough the very negation of the impossible localization of *object (a)*. Every irruption of the gaze

will end up enclosed and disciplined within these four edges.

What would therefore be the fate of the movement-images regarding the split of the visual? In a visual field cut between an imaginary modeled on the law of the One, the Ego and geometral optics and a formalizing procedure made possible by sciences, is there a place left for a film to be something more than a repression of the Real?

4. Conclusion

Cinema, and visual arts in general, can constitute a mode in which different forms are given to the cut of the gaze. But, precisely because of this, they inhabit a contradictory yet, at the same time, extremely interesting terrain where the imaginary is broken and reconstituted with the same act, where the impossibility of visualization is evoked and rejected, at the same time and with the same perceptual gesture. The very multiplicities of forms that this cut can embody produce an internal differentiation alluding to the possibility of a knowledge. The contradiction relies on the fact that this first step toward knowledge entertains a dialectical relation with visualization: art tends toward formalization, but it is a formalization that cannot help but rely on a minimal visualization (even when it tends to an almost self-erasure as in Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, or in Rothko late paintings, or in Derek Jarman's *Blue*). It is only with the second step that we have a properly scientific solution, where the possibility to know the visual even despite its inaccessibility in the imaginary is fully assumed. In the history of science many aspects of the Real have been analysed and formalized despite the impossibility of their visualization until a point where formalization and visualization even became incompatible with each other (as in the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics). The concept of the gaze reinscribes the incompatibility of visualization and formalization within the domain of the visual

itself. What are the possibilities of knowing the visual despite its impossibility of being visualized? It is in the vast field of non-Euclidean geometries from hyperbolic, to elliptic to intrinsic geometry, from the research of Gauss to Reimann to Lobachevsky, and to the studies of topological figures. The concept of the gaze ultimately embodies the different paths of formalizing knowledge out of incongruity and the breaks that characterize the visualization of the imaginary.

A provisional conclusion could be that psychoanalysis, cinema, and the sciences are interwoven when it comes to the problematic of the visual. The visual is split between knowledge and visualization; between the imaginary and the Real; between experience and thought, and all these disciplines entertain different relations regarding such conceptual binomials.

The question to be asked is perhaps more general: is it possible to construct a knowledge of the Real that goes beyond the *a priori* structure of human cognition? Is it possible to sublimate the humanity that limits any form of scientific knowledge toward its most extreme and inhuman limit? A transcendental legislation over the limits of human knowledge and its capacities would end up reiterating a certain form of duality between the possibility of knowledge and the context from which this very act of cognition would emerge. If the gaze were none other than the mark of the subjective mediation in the Real (a "Kant plus the unconscious," but the schema would not differ that much from a traditional transcendental solution), it would constitute none other than the

visual threshold that would impede a direct access to a non-subjectively mediated Real. In the latter eventuality, the Real would still be visible in-itself; it would only imply that the experience of it would be impossible, as a consequence of human limitations. But we believe that the wager of the concept of gaze is more ambitious, because it relies on a much more shattering and trembling eventuality. What if this gaze would constitute the proof of the fact that there is a possibility to know the visual despite its being seen? What if knowledge and formalization could see better than our eyes?

Appendix A: Lacan and the Discourse of Science. Notes for a Further Discussion on Psychoanalysis and Formalization

The Lacanians vs. Science

A specter is haunting the current theoretical debate in psychoanalysis – the specter of techno-science. It has become almost a cliché in Lacanian circles to portray the contemporary domain of science as a “foreclosure of the subject of desire” (Recalcati 2010). What does this mean? Science, or better, its contemporary neoliberal offspring, techno-science at the peak of its social power and recognition, would be responsible for reducing human experience to a transparent and calculable object.

The Lacanian psychoanalytic doxa seems to not tolerate the pretension of contemporary cognitivist-influenced psychology to possess the “objective data.” The latter’s “compulsive drive toward measurement” and its overuse of quantitative statistical models in order to “control,” “categorize,” and “channel” the patient would represent a model of cure where the psychic suffering is reduced to “a void of knowledge that has to be filled with information from the therapeutic Other” (Tognassi 2006). It is nevertheless surprising how in the majority of cases, from a comprehensible ideological critique of the contemporary dominant medical apparatuses, we are suddenly thrown into an utter rejection of scientific rationality. As stated by a prominent

Italian psychoanalyst, Fabio Tognassi (sadly exemplary of a common conviction in the Lacanian community):

The discourse of science – the discourse oriented toward absolute knowledge – aims at revealing the quota of rationality embedded in the Real; it aims at covering with the veil of the signifier – the veil of causality (*causalità*) – the realm of the unexpected (*casualità*). And in doing so it gets rid of what by definition is destined to remain outside of the domain of the Other: *Das Ding*, i.e. what is impossible to be assimilated to knowledge (Tognassi 2006).

The discourse of science would be responsible for a complete reduction of the Real to the domain of the signifier. Its normativity would constitute a typical example of human ὕβρις: the rejection of the limits imposed by the Real on human experience. Moreover, science would erase the ethical status of the unconscious attempting to reduce it to a fully constituted ontological (and because of that, symbolically intelligible) object.

Experience demonstrates this: a form of analysis that boasts of its highly scientific distinctiveness gives rise to normative notions that I characterize by evoking the curse Saint Matthew utters on those who make the bundles heavier when they are to be carried by others. Strengthening the categories of affective normativity produces disturbing results (Lacan 1992, 113-134).

In more appropriate Lacanian terms, the fundamental accusation can be summarized as follows: the image of nature addressed by the discourse of science is characterized by the rejection of sexuated subjects. The Lacanians accused scientific formalization of reducing the sexuated dimension of *parlêtre* to silence. According to this view, the *parlêtre* would expose the impossibility of the realm of the signifier (the Other

of scientific discourse) being able to write a formula of *jouissance*. In other words, there is a singular relationship to *jouissance* rejecting any pretension of universalization and structurally excluded from the realm of the Symbolic.

Thus far we have been addressing the Lacanian doxa. But how incorrect is it to accuse the Lacanian field as a whole of subscribing to this naïve and unacceptable representation of scientific endeavour? If we say that scientific rationality operates a systematic erasure, or foreclosure, of the subject of desire, are we subscribing to a fundamental Lacanian proposition or are we rather incorporating (perniciously incorporating, we are tempted to claim) an ideological rejection of science that has nothing to do with the psychoanalytic field itself? Is it correct to say, as Miller seems to believe, that the task of psychoanalysis is to bring back to the surface what science forecloses from its discourse? That psychoanalysis is, in a sense, the reverse side of science? Is psychoanalysis destined to play the part of the analysis of the formations of the unconscious of scientific discourse? Is not science – the ideological Lacanian would claim – perhaps full of slips of the tongue, symptoms, unsuccessful concealments of the singularity of the scientist?

Our thesis will rather go in the opposite direction: science does not represent the successful concealment of the subject of the unconscious, but rather the most blatant proof of its existence and productivity. If we define the expression “subject of the unconscious” deprived of all the inevitable (and hard to die) imaginary and ideological

representations and we reduce it to the core of its objectivity, we will have nothing but a practice of de-imaginarization. We used the term “practice” because the subject of the unconscious is not a substantialized entity that we need to approximately approach with increasingly accurate clinical knowledge, but rather a hypothesis that orientates a never-ending process of de-imaginarization and creation of non-imaginary thought. The term “objectivity” (rather than “productive illusion,” for example) should be understood in all its anti-empirical stance: it is “a conquest and a task, which means that its progress recalls a common root between the theoretical and the ethical” (Petitot 1982, 1034-1041). If psychoanalysis and science have such a common root, it relies on a counter-intuitive and anti-imaginary form of thought that equals the subtractive action of separation from the imaginary with the creation of the New.

The crude simplifications that characterize the contemporary Lacanian doxa are not simply a sign of misunderstanding or inaccuracy in the reception of the Lacanian text. They rather indicate, sometimes even in a symptomatic (that is, contradictory) form, a hesitation that inhabited Lacan’s teaching from the very beginning. As if the relationship between psychoanalysis and science had followed different paths that never reached a satisfactory synthesis. When faced with such a crucial epistemological problem, we are left with attempted yet unresolved paths which allow for many different Lacanian projects (both clinically and theoretically), which sometimes feature very few elements in common to the point that they barely resemble each other. The

unacceptable equation of science with the foreclosure of the subject of the unconscious coexists with the Cartesian subtractive definition of the subject itself. The statements about science as a paranoiac pretension to reduce the Real to the signifier are followed by an endless endeavour in order never to separate psychoanalysis from the project of formalization. The accusation against science, that it is ideological, is accompanied by a procedure of transmission of psychoanalysis which is very reminiscent of the process of the axiomatization of formal knowledge. In the following paragraphs, we will try to delineate some of these paths in order to elucidate how the missed encounter between science and psychoanalysis might have occurred in the first place. It is our conviction that a critique of the misappropriations and simplifications of scientific rationality by the Lacanian community can be addressed and partially resolved via the internal conceptual resources of the Lacanian field itself. It is an indication – we hope – of another possible alliance of Lacanian psychoanalysis and science, which is as necessary today as it was almost fifty years ago when the attempt of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse* group went largely ignored by the followers of Jacques Lacan, remaining so through the following years and up until today.

The Cartesian subject of the unconscious

If we consider only the interventions directly made by Lacan himself and not the contributions of many of his pupils, colleagues, and collaborators, the epistemological question in psychoanalysis was addressed primarily (and almost exclusively) in the last text included in the *Écrits*, arguably one of the most important of the entire collection: *Science and Truth*. The article was specifically written as an *overture* for the first issue of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse* and was meant to give a significant orientation to the development of the journal. Lacan nevertheless decided to read the article at the first session of Seminar XIII, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, on 1 December 1965, in what was to become probably the year when he dealt most profoundly with the relationship between psychoanalysis and science.

In this crucially important article Lacan does not make a direct pronouncement concerning psychoanalysis's vocation as a science. Contrary to what Freud struggled for during his whole life, at this point of his teaching, Lacan does not put much faith in the possibility of formalizing psychoanalysis according to a scientific protocol. He rather underlines that "the subject upon which we operate in psychoanalysis can only be the subject of science" (Lacan 2006, 729). It is important to stress such a preliminary remark, without which there is only confusion in the relationship between science and psychoanalysis. Although the debate regarding the Freudian project of a scientific expression of psychoanalysis does not seem to have ceased even today, as many psychoanalysts continue to insist on the necessity of psychoanalysis being formalized in

a scientific manner, Lacan takes a different path. He states the crucial importance of the relation of psychoanalysis to the field constituted by modern science – not to science itself – and he claims that without that field any form of psychoanalysis would not be possible. It would be meaningless to ask under which conditions psychoanalysis can be considered a science. What does matter for Lacan is how the field constituted autonomously by science creates the conditions of possibility for psychoanalysis.

This is why it was important to promote first, and as a fact to be distinguished from the question of knowing whether psychoanalysis is a science (that is, whether its field is scientific), the idea that its praxis implies no subject other than that of science (Lacan 2006, 733).

As Jean-Claude Milner puts it::

With regard to the analytic operation, science does not play the role of an ideal – possibly infinitely distant – point; strictly speaking, science is not exterior to psychoanalysis, it structures in an internal manner the very matter of the object of psychoanalysis (Milner 2000, 35).

Instead of dealing directly with an epistemological question regarding psychoanalysis itself, Lacan here establishes the common ground that coordinates what is nevertheless a separation between science and psychoanalysis. Lacan underlines that in the field inaugurated by modern science, identified here with the figures of Galileo and Descartes, it is possible to deduce a particular figure of the subject, which is the same subject upon which psychoanalysis as a practice operates. What is it?

Lacan identifies modern physics with a specific operation: the elimination of every contingent quality of existents in the description of the world. Therefore, a theory of the subject of science repeats the same gesture. The characters of the particular individual, be they psychic, somatic or intellectual, are stripped down. As Milner puts it, the subject of science “is neither mortal nor immortal, neither pure nor impure, neither just nor unjust, neither sinner nor saint, neither damned nor saved” (Milner 2000, 38): it does not have consciousness, interiority, or reflexivity. Science carries out a cut in order to separate the subject from the individual. All the qualitative contingent determinations are erased in order to isolate a pure non-specific core. This is what the *cogito* makes possible: it is an operation of minimal subtraction from every positive attribute. Lacan, following Koyré, designates the historical moment when this act of *coupure* emerged for the first time in Descartes. Such is the scope of Cartesian doubt: the suspension of the certainty of every identifiable particular in order to make the void of enunciation emerge in all its clarity.

But the eliminativist gesture is only the first movement of the *cogito*. The other – which is specifically Lacanian – is the identification of this subtracted void with thought. Lacan’s postulate claims that there is an unbridgeable distance between thought and knowledge. They belong to two completely different fields. Thought appears only when all the positive qualities of knowledge are stripped down. The *cogito* is “the defile of a rejection of all knowledge” (Lacan 2006, 727). Lacan’s original re-interpretation relies on

its equation with a thought without qualities: a pure void act of subtraction. The gesture of thought is not the positive correlate of an imaginary consciousness, but the erasure of any positive determination until what remains is only the subtractive clarity of a generic place. It is in this precise point that Lacan traces the continuity between the gesture inaugurated by modern science and the birth of psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud. If the subtractive subject of science appears at the moment when the positivity of knowledge is cast into doubt, psychoanalysis represents the path *par excellence* in order to be faithful to this groundbreaking discovery. What do we have in the symptoms if not an act of castration of the positive certitude of consciousness's knowledge? If there is a thought in the dream, in the *witz*, in the slip of the tongue, is it not it at the expense of every positivity of imaginary knowledge?

In order to develop the conviction of the subtractive dimension of the unconscious, it is mandatory to accept a preliminary remark: as we assumed the separation between knowledge and thought, we also have to accept the complete separation between knowledge and the unconscious. The unconscious does not have anything to do with positive knowledge. To put it in simple terms, the unconscious does not know anything.⁸ Against a widely diffused opinion, for example, very popular in

⁸ "Witness [Freud's] break with the most prestigious of his followers, Jung, as soon as the latter slipped into something whose function can only be defined as an

Jungian-influenced circles, the unconscious is not an archive of past experiences, nor an archaeological storage of traumas, nor an accumulation of hidden and repressed images and tropes (which when brought to the collective level necessarily become archetypes). This is the reason why Lacanian-oriented clinical psychoanalysis is never based on the interpretation of the unconscious. Lacan was utterly clear in claiming that psychoanalysis does not have anything to do with hermeneutic interpretation, with the practice of creating a connection between the surface of a symptomatic formation and the profound causes of its emergence. If this were possible, it would be necessary to postulate a positive substantialized stratum of intelligible causes that could be reconstructed through the analytic process. The unconscious would in this case be a hidden positive articulation of causes, images, repressed elements, and so on. It would be something, and not a pure void, as the Cartesian/Freudian subtractive gesture suggests. Psychoanalysis would be the clinical act of unveiling this hidden secret core and the end of analytic therapy would be the successful appropriation of something deposited in the profound depth of one's own personality.

We will see on the contrary that Lacan will develop a very different theory of the

attempt to reinstate a subject endowed with depths (with an "s"), that is, a subject constituted by a relationship—said to be archetypal—to knowledge." (Lacan 2006, 728).

end of analysis, far from any “correspondence” with an already existing hidden stratum of causes (knowledge) and consequential to the definition of the unconscious as a subtractive void. Psychoanalysis is not about “knowing the secret of oneself.” But if the unconscious is void and deprived of any positive determination, what would be the Lacanian understanding of the clinical “experience of the unconscious”? How would it be possible to have the experience of the “rejection of all positive knowledge”? Lacan’s answer is that if psychoanalysis is not an experience of knowledge, nor a reconstruction of a hidden past, it cannot but be an experience of truth. In which sense?

We will address this point in the following paragraphs. For now let us recapitulate once again the Cartesian-Lacanian definition of the subject as derivable from *Science and Truth*: if the hypothesis that there is a subject of science and that it emerged with modern science and that it is identified with a subtraction from every positive determination of knowledge is correct, then this subject is the unconscious. And conversely, in the unconscious there is thought. Psychoanalysis is an experience of thought as truth, separated from the acquisition of positive knowledge.

As rightfully synthesized by Alain Badiou::

What still attaches Lacan [...] to the Cartesian epoch of science is the thought that the subject must be maintained in the pure void of its subtraction if one wishes to save truth. Only such a subject allows itself to be sutured within the logical, wholly transmissible, form of science (Badiou 2005, 432).

Jean-Claude Milner – letter and contingency

In order to unpack the rather elusive remarks on the ensemble of these concepts (subject, science, truth, thought, and the unconscious) we will now refer to two historically important Lacanian contributions not directly made by Lacan on this topic. Both of them were highly influential in the way the relation between psychoanalysis and science has been thought and developed over the last thirty years within the Lacanian community. Jean-Claude Miller's work *L'Œuvre Claire*, published in 1995, analyzed the Lacanian legacy of Koyré in all its consequences regarding the relationship between mathematics, the letter, and contingency. Jacques-Alain Miller's early piece, *La Suture: Éléments de la logique du signifiant*, published in 1966 in the first issue of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, explores the question of the relation between subject and science.

Jean-Claude Milner, in a commentary on *Science and Truth* in chapter 2 of *L'Œuvre Claire*, derives additional consequences from the preliminary identification of the subject of science with the subject of the unconscious. According to Milner, in the famous Galilean aphorism – “The great book of the universe is written in mathematical language and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures” – the accent should be put on the written dimension of language. The discipline that constitutes a point of reference for modern science is philology, not mathematics:

In Galileo's eyes, mathematics and measure were the means [...] that would allow humble physics to one day equal what the prestigious philology, through the science of language (via grammar), and through the science of written documents, had, long ago, accomplished (Milner 2000, 42).

The ideal precision of modern science, for Milner, was therefore linked to the idea of translating the empirical object with its equivocal confusion into a literal and precise entity. The Cartesian subtraction is equated with a reduction to a pure literal expression. What is interesting here is not so much the reductive reading of Galilean science operated by Milner, who reduces the object of science to the "set of what exists empirically" (Milner 2000, 41), but the way through which the letter is surreptitiously put at the ideal center of a scientific endeavour. Galilean science becomes, for Milner, an indefatigable search for precision in order to elevate the empirical object to the level of the letter. Only a literal science can be a precise one. The technical instrumentation is aimed at extracting from the empirical equivocity of reality the clear precision of the letter. They are the instruments for reducing science to the model of philology.

But according to Milner, the discontinuity created by modern science in reducing the world to the letter requires some further clarifications. Psychoanalysis cannot limit itself to being dependent on the established common ground between its clinical practice and the field opened up by scientific modernity. Is psychoanalysis, after all, only a second-degree discipline, subject to the domain of modern science? And even more, is it possible to link psychoanalysis to a historical event such as the contingent emergence of

modern science?

According to Alexander Koyré, Galilean science can be understood only historically, that is, negatively when put in a relation of opposition to and difference from the ancient episteme of the Greeks. The latter, modeled on an understanding of mathematics as a necessitated series of demonstrations, was devoted to isolating from the empirical world that object which, in all necessity and for all eternity, cannot be other than what it is. It was an epistemology according to which a complete science would thus be the science of the most eternal and necessary object, the celestial bodies. This necessitates a conflicting and unresolved dialectic between a mathematical demonstrative practice entirely devoted to logical necessity, and the realm of the empirical, which in all its diversity and equivocality is intrinsically rebellious to mathematics. The realm of Being, in the Milnerian/Koyrean understanding of the ancient Greek episteme, would be divided, ontologically no less than axiologically, into different degrees of perfection: from the contingency of bodily existents, to the Supreme incorporeal Being of God (necessary, perfect, eternal).

Galilean modernity is defined by an epistemological break from such an epistemology. Modern science can spell out all the empirical without concerning itself with any hierarchy of being, and it can do so with the letter, i.e. via a calculation practice. While for the Greeks mathematics guaranteed direct access to the eternal, modern science makes use of a completely different mathematics which – as letter,

insists Milner – it is able to grasp the diverse in its quality of being incessantly other. The empirical is not degraded as a lower form of being, but rather literalizable as empirical. The defining feature of Galilean science is thus not the fact of it being mathematical, or at least not more that it already was with the ancient episteme – “in certain regards, modern science is even less so” (Milner 2000, 47). The discontinuity is represented by the emergence of a particular dimension of mathematics: its being a letter. From a mathematics based on demonstration, modern science is defined by calculation. But what is even more important is that while the Greek episteme was aimed at elevating the equivocality of contingent beings to the heights of celestial bodies, modern science is completely lacking any axiological preoccupation: “one thing [...] is sure: if ethics exists, science has nothing to do with it” (Milner 2000, 49). The letter is able to grasp the empirical as empirical; it looks at the contingent as contingent.

Milner’s problem is the nature of the difference between mathematics as necessitated demonstrative practice and mathematics as a literalization of contingency. As a strong structuralist thinker, he cannot accept that the break of modernity is merely a historical event. And it is at this precise point that his path diverges from Koyré. According to him, Lacan in *Science and Truth* is still too indebted to a Koyrean historical concept of discontinuity, a mistake that will be corrected only a few years later with the theory of discourses. In order to purify his reflection on science and psychoanalysis, Lacan needs to develop a non-chronological articulation of the concept of the break.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of a new discourse, the passage from one discourse to another (what Lacan terms the “quarter turn”), in a word, the change, can be an event; these events are an object that historians attempt to grasp in the form of chronology. But they are not what historians say they are. [...] In itself, the quarter turn has no need to inscribe itself in a historical series (Milner 2000, 51).

Once Lacan has been able to develop a non-chronological theory of the break, it is possible for Milner to derive a non-chronological theory of the epistemological break of modernity without relying on any specific historical event. The science of the letter is just a figure of the possibility to grasp contingency as such. The problem is not the passage from the ancient episteme to modern science, but how science, far from being an instrument for reducing the empirical to the same, is in fact an instrument for grasping what can be infinitely other than what it is.

But what then, according to Milner, is the specific relation of the letter with contingency? And why would the letter be able to grasp the infinite mutability of contingency? In its invariability, the letter, in fact, may look similar to the eternal idea of the ancient episteme. But the opposition should be sought somewhere else. Milner claims that the immutability of what, like the letter, has no reason to be other than it is, is different from the immutability of what, like the celestial bodies, cannot, without violating reason, be other than it is. There would thus be a substantial nonconformity between the necessity of the laws of science and the necessity of the Supreme Being, even though at the imaginary level it is nowhere to be found. Is it not in fact true that the laws of nature as described by the empirical sciences may look like necessary and

eternal laws, as if they were the expression of a Supreme and Eternal Being?

Science operates on an equivocity of the empirical that at any time and at any point can be infinitely other than it is. Nevertheless, when the letter intervenes, it fixes it as it is,⁹ and it may give the impression that the empirical cannot be other than what it has become. In other words, science fixes the contingency of the empirical in a necessary law, even though the condition of the second moment relies on the infinite possibilities of the first. Paraphrasing Mallarmè's *Coup de dés*, Milner claims that in order for a point of the universe to be manifested as it is, "requires the dice to be thrown in a possible universe wherein this point would be other than it is" (Milner 2000, 54). There is therefore a specific intertwining between contingency and necessity. Necessity constitutes the operation that science conducts on the infinite possibilities of contingency.

But here Milner suddenly clarifies his own thesis: in the interval of time when the dice tumble before falling there is "the emergence of the subject, which is not the thrower (the thrower does not exist), but the dice themselves insofar as they are in suspension." (reference?) At the moment when the mutually exclusive possibilities face themselves, the impossible emerges as a figure of contingency in the flash just after the

⁹ It is on this point that the much more convincing reflection of Quentin Meillassoux on the meaningless sign diverges from the relation between letter and contingency in Milner. For Meillassoux, the letter of formal languages (which he takes care to differentiate from the letter of everyday language) has the ability to grasp the hyper-chaotic contingency *as* contingency: that is, without converting it into the actualized necessity of the laws of natural sciences. See Quentin Meillassoux 2012.

fall of the dice when the number cannot be another one. The passage from contingency to necessity has a vanishing mediator, which is the tumbling of the dice, in other words, the subject. When the letter fixes contingency in a necessity, it imposes the erasure of these infinite possibilities, marking them as impossible. Necessity takes the place of contingency as much as impossibility takes the place of infinite possibilities. Science fixes this point and it forbids the return to the contingent. Psychoanalysis and science here deviate from one another: according to Milner, the former constitutes the persistent contestation of contingency against its own erasure by the laws of the latter. The letter is fixed, but at the same time it refuses to be subjugated to the regime of the Same as in the ancient episteme. The famous Freudian statement according to which the unconscious does not recognize that time should be understood in these terms: the unconscious does not recognize the conversion of contingency into necessity as operated by the fixing of the letter by science.

Jacques-Alain Miller addressed the same point regarding the well-known paradox of contingent futures (Miller 2005, 18-19). Sophism explains the conversion of contingency into necessity as follows: from the point of view of today, an event may or may not take place tomorrow (possibility). Tomorrow, in the eventuality that it does take place, it will always have been true that it took place. And it will be necessary that it has always been true that it took place (impossible that it did not). Miller underlines how the conversion of the possible into the necessary is an effect of retroaction, and

psychoanalysis is concerned precisely with this backward temporality of past signification. In the temporality of the unconscious, contingency does not cease to haunt its conversion into necessity. According to Miller, the linear time of science is the time of the transformation of possibility into actuality, but there is also the retroactive temporality where the impossible (what has not taken place) refuses to be completely excluded (“foreclosed,” Lacan would have said) and is still effectively operative as impossible. Psychoanalysis constitutes the objection against the exclusion of the impossible from the realm of the necessary. Or in other words, the subject of psychoanalysis constitutes the exception to the linear progression of the temporality of science.

The erasure of this retroactive temporality of the contingent subject of the unconscious from the fixed letter of science has some specific consequences in the relation between psychoanalysis and science. While Lacan claims that science was responsible for opening up the field for the emergence of the subject, it seems that it also closes it down with the prescription of the inopportunity to return to the contingent. *Science and Truth* bears the trace of this double movement that also exposes the uncertainty and hesitation in Lacanian thinking about the doctrine of science. Later in the text, Lacan reiterates the conviction that something in the status of the object of science “remained unelucidated since the birth of science” (Lacan 2006, 733). This object is none other than the pivotal element around which the theory and practice of

psychoanalysis revolves: the notion of *objet (a)*, i.e. the causal dimension of truth. Lacan is not afraid to define it as “the breaking point” (Lacan 2006, 737), where the path of science and psychoanalysis diverge – “the truth as cause being distinguished from knowledge put into operation” (Lacan 2006, 738). Science allows the delineation of the crack between knowledge and truth, but at the same time it keeps it veiled and it persists in the illusion of joining them together. Science should thus be blamed primarily for forgetting: forgetting the trace of the infinite contingency that the letter fixes, but also for forgetting the dimension of truth that psychoanalysis applied in its practice. “The radicality of this forgetting – Milner claims – is what Lacan called foreclosure” (Milner 2000, 54). But since the subject is what emerges in the tumbling of the dice at the instant when contingency is about to morph into necessity, and since the subject-as-lack is what is at the core of truth as a cause in scientific endeavour, “suture and foreclosure are necessarily suture and foreclosure of the subject” (Milner 2000, 54).

Jacques-Alain Miller and Suture

The Lacanian argument according to which scientific rationality structurally involves a misrecognition/erasure of the function of the subject – i.e. a foreclosure – can be found, skilfully argued, in an early text by Jacques-Alain Miller from the mid-1960s. First presented as a paper at the 9th session (24 February 1965) of Lacan’s Seminar XII

(*Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis*), *La Suture: Éléments de la logique du signifiant*, “the first great Lacanian text not to be written by Lacan himself” (Badiou 2008, 25), constitutes the perfect completion of *Science and Truth* in addressing the complex relationship between Lacanianism and science. The term suture, investigated by Miller in the text, was mentioned by Lacan several times during Seminar XI in 1964, but never thoroughly theorized. It was therefore Miller’s task in this article, also included in the first issue of the *Cahiers pour l’analyse*, to rigorously define the concept.

With the term *suture* Miller understands “the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse” (Miller 1966, 39). With this text he wants to ground conceptually the act of cancellation that the discourse of science operates on the subject of the unconscious and at the same time to generalize this very procedure in the way any subject relates to the signifier chain. As in the erasure of contingency in its conversion into necessity, the *punctum* of the enunciation of the subject (the “trembling of the dice”) is at the same time the fundamental operational gesture for setting the machine of science into motion and that element the forgetting of which is inevitable once the discourse of science is established. Why is there this apparent contradiction for an element that is at the same time necessary and rejected? Because the cancellation act is never entirely successful, and it cannot be: some remainders, some symptoms, some stains, will always hijack the discourse of science, exposing its proclaimed universality to the contestation of the formations of the unconscious. The subject of the unconscious is thus always operative;

the discourse of science, though, refuses to recognize its truth and therefore rejects it while not wanting to know anything about it.

In order to prove his argument, as an object of analysis Miller takes the scientific discourse of Gottlob Frege's *Foundations of Arithmetic*. His thesis is that in Frege's theory of the constitution of the series of natural numbers "in the genesis of progression, the function of the subject, miscognized, is operative" (Miller 1966, 40). Let us see what Miller's argument is regarding this specific scientific discourse.

Frege's logicist system tries to found the sequence of natural numbers: faithful to his anti-empiricism, he deals only with concepts deprived of any external referent. It is an autonomous construction of logic through itself. He therefore has to rely on a primacy of a thing that then has to be subsumed by a concept (i.e. like counting an external already existing object). The first problem is that even before a concept can subsume an object, one has to explain how the object is transformed into a unit. In order to become numerable, the object as an empirical referent has to disappear. Frege defines the unit with a redoubled concept of identity ("the number assigned to the concept F is the extension of the concept 'identical to the concept F'"') by borrowing Leibniz's definition of identity: *eadem sunt quorum unum potest substitui alteri salva veritate* (those things are identical of which one can be substituted for the other without loss of truth). Leibniz's *salva veritate* thus rests on the concept of self-identity: truth can be said only of things that are identical to themselves, and conversely, the confirmation of self-identity

preserves truth.

According to Miller, Frege's system relies on a performative contradiction. On one hand, if a thing is not identical to itself, the whole logical edifice collapses (truth is not saved), on the other hand, non-self identity has to be evoked, even for an instant, in order to found the redoubling of self-identity. Truth is thus founded on a simultaneous invocation-and-exclusion of the non self-identical. In other words, if we supposed that an object were not self-identical, it would entirely subvert truth given that the principle 'A is A' is the law of any possible truth. No object should thus fall under the concept "not identical to itself," which is therefore void. In order for this very principle of not-self-identity to be rejected, it must first have previously been posed. Miller's fundamental argument, which will constitute a fundamental building block for the Lacanian logic of the signifier chain, regards the foundation of the logical edifice thusly:

in the autonomous construction of the logical through itself, it has been necessary, in order to exclude any reference to the real, to evoke on the level of the concept an object not-identical-with itself, to be subsequently rejected from the dimension of truth (Miller 1966, 45).

Miller wants to keep the anti-empiricist stance of Frege's logicist system with its refusal to presuppose any extra-logical real, while at the same time highlighting the point of internal exclusion that founds this very system (following the model of the Möbius strip). Zero is the number that will be at the same time present and absent. Or better stated, it will be counted as absence – "the first non-real thing in thought" (Miller

1966, 44). Referring to a category with no members, zero is by definition void; nevertheless it is *a* category, and in being such it can effectively be counted. With such an operation the number 1 is produced, and through the repetition of the same procedure, and also all the other natural numbers. In this movement, the mark of the non-self-identical forms the foundation of the signifying chain of numbers.

Miller concludes by establishing a logical priority of 0 over 1. Self-identity has as its origin a mark of non-self-identity. But in order for self-identity to emerge, while preserving the consistency of truth, it is necessary for the non-self-identity not only to be elided, but actually repressed. Miller here applies a short circuit between the active causality of the non-self-identity in founding the sequence, and its disappearance in the progression of the natural numbers/signifying chain. The truth caused by the action of a lack (truth-as-lack) is reversed in a rejection of the dimension of truth from the scientific discourse (the lack-of-truth). The subject of the unconscious is that non-self-identical lack, which the discourse of science summons and rejects, wanting to know nothing of it:

To designate [this operation] I choose the name suture. Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse; we shall see that it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in [*tenant-lieu*]. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension – the general relation of lack to the structure – of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of [*tenant-lieu*] (Miller 1966, 40).

In delineating the concept of suture Miller establishes what will become a Lacanian canon: from now on, the relation that the subject-as-lack entertains with the signifier chain (and if we follow the definition of science as a reduction of the Real to the

realm of the signifier, also with the discourse of science in general) will be understood as follows. The subject-as-lack is the hidden and repressed causality of the signifier chain that is nevertheless always operative in the dialectic of substitution and permutations of the elements. The never ending slipping of the chain is none other than the causality miscognized but nevertheless not-absent of the lack. The subject may thus seem absent: the chain of scientific signifiers seems to be perfectly self-sufficient. But it is all an ideological mystification. In fact, if we look closely, the Lacanian would say, we are able to see that the subject is far from being absent: it is just stitched in the very progression of the chain with the always different stand-in (*lieu-tenant*) that presentifies its presence-as-absence (its being-counted-as-absence). The subject is therefore neither present nor absent: it rather constitutes the truth of the signifier chain. It is sutured at the chain.

This triplet of terms – lack, subject, and truth – constitutes a dimension of incompatibility with the discourse of science. Lacan concludes *Science and Truth* with an unambiguous claim regarding science's rejection of the dimension of truth:

[O]ur science's prodigious fecundity must be examined in relation to the fact, sustaining science, that science does-not-want-to-know-anything about the truth as cause. You may recognize therein my formulation of *Verwerfung* or "foreclosure," which forms a closed series here with *Verdrängung*, "repression," and *Verneinung*, "negation," whose function in magic and religion I have indicated in passing (Lacan 2006, 742).

As Lacan says earlier in the text: the "point [of truth] is veiled in science" (Lacan 2006, 738). Such a rejection of truth must place science in the field of an imaginary ideology, structurally ignorant of the causal dimension of lack. The transmission of its

knowledge is reduced to the level of communication. In this field where contingency is forgotten, where there is a blind miscognition of the presence/absence of the subject, where the Real is arrogantly proclaimed to be reduced to a perfectly transmissible sequence of signifiers, psychoanalysis cannot but play the role of analysis of the symptoms of science with a very unappealing conceptual consequence. Science in the arguments of Milner, Miller, and Lacan's *Science and Truth* is a field that is not able to recognize where its foundation actually lies: that is, in the causal dimension of truth-as-lack (or as subject). The scientific discourse cannot be self-sufficient if not as an ideology, because its foundation lies in what it is rejected from its field. Miller's analysis of Frege is in this regard a straightforward argument in favour of a foundational theory of science by the subject of the unconscious: the 0 – the non-self-identity, i.e. the subject – is primary and foundational regarding the 1 of self-identity. Following this line of thought, psychoanalysis ends up placing itself in a position of mastery toward science: no matter what its concepts or propositions are, science will never be able to generate truths. Truth and science are on two separate planes that never cross each other: they rather lie intertwined in a Möbius strip, as Lacan loves to say. The problem is that the three-dimensional point of view able to theorize on the relation between science and truth is firmly occupied by psychoanalysis as a theory: in this case, weirdly close to what Lacan always forbade it from being. A metalanguage.

The Axiomatization of Psychoanalysis

If we follow the elaboration of the previously discussed Lacanians regarding the relationship between psychoanalysis and science, it seems that we have arrived at a cul-de-sac. In what risks being a portrait painted with excessively dark tones, there might be an alternative route, which while not resolving the issue might at least help reformulate the problem in a more productive way. While the concept of *suture* risks reducing the field of scientific practice to a mere imaginary foreclosure of the causal dimension of truth, what might assist in a reconsideration of the problem is none other than the minimal definition of the subject of modern science developed by Descartes and re-proposed by Lacan in the first half of *Science and Truth*.

It is not difficult in fact to note a shift from the subtractive gesture of the Cartesian *cogito* to the theory of the productivity of the lack in the causality of the structure. While the former movement is characterized by a rejection of any positive knowledge in order to isolate a void, in the latter we have a lack that lies at the base of the productive machine of positive knowledge. While the Cartesian subject is a nothing that has to be produced through the practice of the de-imaginarization (or de-ideologization) of a positivity (in Althusserian terms, an epistemological break), the action of the lack is an underlying, yet apparently rejected, hidden cause that founds, through a short-circuit between a level and a meta-level, positive – and by definition

ideological – knowledge. The problem of the relation between psychoanalysis and science cannot evade the question of whether the object of a scientific endeavour is the positive construction of knowledge, as is ideologically claimed by Miller and Milner, or rather the productive isolation of a thought through a procedure of subtractive formalization. The consequences of such a problem are pivotal for a theory of the subject of science, deprived of the confusion that the term “subject” and “science” might engender when not carefully defined, as is in the case of the Millerian theory of suture. The difference between the two definitions of science is that in the first case the subject is a logical presupposition that lies at the core of all already existing knowledge: it is the truth-as-a-foundation that provides the conditions of possibility of every proposition and every object. In the second case, which can be called Cartesian, the subject is a hypothesis, or even better a task that has to be effectively rendered operative through a series of operations of de-imaginarization and de-ideologization.

Alain Badiou, in *Marque et manque: à propos du zéro*, an article from 1969 from the last issue of *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, gives a compelling and convincing critique of the Millerian understanding of the concept of suture in not dissimilar terms. According to Badiou, the relation that a subject entertains with the chain of its discourse can be called suture only when these discourses are not genuinely scientific. In a dialectic between ideological closure – when the subject appears as a cause of the scientific chain in the typical Lacanian short-circuit between level and meta-level – and a scientific rupture

which operates a constant de-suturing (Fraser 2007, xiii – lxv), Badiou coherently defines an ideal universal science as an autonomous machine completely deprived of any cause, and therefore of any subject:

There is no subject of science. Infinitely stratified, regulating its passages, science is pure space, with neither reverse nor mark nor place for what it excludes. A foreclosure, but one of nothing, may be called a psychosis of no subject – and therefore of all: universal by full right, a shared delirium, it is enough to hold oneself within it to no longer be anyone, anonymously dispersed in the hierarchy of orders. Science is an Outside without a blind spot (Badiou 1969, 161-162).

Here Badiou understand the term subject in the ideological (or Millerian) sense: as the alleged structural lack of the scientific discourse that ends up constituting the foundational cause of it. Science, on the contrary, is the progressive operation of de-ideologization and de-imaginarization that excludes the ideological operator of subject from its field until the regulative-ideal point of an “infinite stratification,” a “pure space,” or a “psychosis”: a point where science would be completely free from any ideological recuperation – a “machinic universalism,” as Zachary Luke Fraser defines it (Fraser 2007, xlix). But if we understand the term subject not in the imaginary or ideological sense, but in the subtractive and Cartesian sense, we see that this very act of an epistemological break is none other than the process of the reduction of the positivity of ideological knowledge to the productivity of the pure void. In other words, it is the process of questioning the positivity of the Imaginary in order for the subtraction of the pure thought-as-void to emerge. Psychoanalysis has too often been crudely reduced to the practice of hermeneutical analysis of an already-existing subject of the unconscious

("it is down there, we just have to dig into the psyche in order to take it out") as if it were a homunculus placed inside of a human being. But the subject of the unconscious, if we follow the subtractive, non-substantial, and Cartesian definition given by Lacan, is not something that is already there from the outset; it rather has to be produced during the experience of analysis. At the beginning of an analysis a subject is necessarily a hypothesis. In this sense, psychoanalysis could be coherently defined as a machine in order for the pure void of the unconscious – the subtraction from any ideological positivity of knowledge – to emerge: at the end, not at the beginning. It is a technique for helping the rigorous counterintuitive de-suturing operation of the scientific machine. Psychoanalysis is not a technique for giving a series of enigmatic signifiers a positive signification, but it is rather a way to get rid of any pretension of signification: to isolate the pure subtractive gesture of the resistance to positive signification.

The problem of the subjective experience of psychoanalysis is rather that the tendency to reduce the pure nothingness of the surface to the deepness of meaning is extremely strong, and it is precisely what concerns the intricacies of the register of the Imaginary. A formation of the unconscious can only be partially reduced to a certain interpretation during psychoanalysis. An analytic interpretation is by definition always insufficient (and this is the reason why Lacanian analysts have the tendency to remain silent and to avoid giving a meaning to a symptom), but the sequence and the multiplicity of wrong interpretations session after session expose in a progressively clear

way the fact that there is something that cannot be reduced to interpretation: something which remains stubbornly on the surface. What happens when, after many years of analysis, an analysand starts to be able to circumscribe the kernel of the symptom that is reluctant to be reduced to a meaning is none other than the tiring acceptance of a nothingness, or in better terms, the personal construction of this nothingness. Many Lacanians define the circumscription of the un-analysable kernel of an analysis *sinthome*, borrowing a term used by Lacan in his seminars of the late Seventies. But this term, which had a certain function within the progression of Lacan's teaching, has been almost unanimously taken as an ultimate (and singular) proof of a re-substantialization of this void in what became a bizarre version of a materialism of *jouissance*.

The contribution that science can make to psychoanalysis is precisely the rigorous conceptualization of this gesture of subtraction from knowledge. Science, and in particular mathematics, is in fact able to provide transmissible constructability to this nothing. While psychoanalysis (in this sense, closer to politics than science) is able to de-ideologize and de-imaginarize the stubborn tendency of the individual to rely on a sequence of positive signification and to isolate the kernel of ultimate resistance to meaning, science is actually able to construct a sequence of thoughts and concepts on this nothing. Mathematics is the proof that the nothing that we isolate at the end of an analysis is not the ultimate word of psychoanalysis: this is the reason why until the end of his life Lacan never gave up on the question of the transmissibility of the unconscious.

That gesture of subtraction cannot end with an individual (or subjective, there is no difference at this level) conglomerate of bodily *jouissance*, defined as *sinthome*. This cynical outcome – which unfortunately became dominant in a Lacanian community progressively hegemonized by the primacy of a clinic which increasingly resembles the primacy of the “cure” – cannot contemplate the fact that upon this very nothingness something can still be done and still be constructed. Science maintains the promise of a possible collective outcome for the – otherwise unjustly accused – individuality of the experience of analysis. The void at the end of analysis is not a therapeutic goal, but rather a starting point for constructing an edifice of concepts. Psychoanalysis is, in a word, a propaedeutic for a de-ideologized science.

The concept of axiom can be an appropriate way to explain how concretely a re-framing of the question of the relationship between psychoanalysis and science, thought and knowledge, subject and ideology, subtraction and positivity can look. The axiom indicates a procedure according to which a spontaneous (i.e. ideological) definition of a certain object is progressively deprived of any intuitive presuppositions and reduced to a minimal group of properties which are the ones given by the chosen system (and not more). Contrary to the Euclidean model of axiomatization, which started from the self-evidence of a certain ensemble of concepts (e.g. line, point, etc.), the formal axiomatic does not rely on any spontaneous or ideological presupposed definition. It actually produces its own elements and concepts by itself. Here we can see how the Badiouian

stratification of a scientific machine with no outside, as was addressed in *Marque et manqué*, might look. But how it is possible to clean the spontaneous understanding of certain concepts in order to arrive at a formal axiomatization? Gabriele Lolli explains it in this way:

At first, you take some rough analogies from already known domains, like physics: for example, in order to refer to the topological notions invented by Cantor, what might the word “dense” suggest when referring to the distribution of the points of a set? Does it mean that the points “touch” themselves? But the points cannot touch themselves even if they are very close. We can say that there are many of them in a small space, but in fact we should say that there are infinite points. And that is not even enough. If we take an example from everyday life and from the distribution of populations: to explain the density we can think of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood, but that is not enough; we can think of the roommates of an apartment, but that is not enough; we can think that in every room there is at least one person, but that is not enough; we can think that in every square meter there is at least one person, until the area tends to zero. After a certain point we have to abandon the analogy with real populations. Infinity imposes conditions that go beyond any confrontation with the finite world (Lolli 1994, 23).

Little by little, when the conditions start to become more and more precise through a formal sequence of operations, they become sufficient to make the properties explicit. When we reach this point, the spontaneous ideological definitions of the elements are no longer taken into consideration. A notion is formed from and depends only on the explicit characteristics and not the ones that are alluded to or not mentioned. The same thing happens with the definition of the concept set in set theory: maybe at first we have to define it as a collection of different elements, but then it becomes clear that the elements belonging to a set are a set themselves, and the primary definition of

what a set is must be abandoned. What a set is – at that point – will no longer be a primary definition, but an internal production of the axiomatic system itself. As if the set were a creation of the axiomatic system.

This procedure, according to which a formal element is first considered in its analogical relation with something external to itself and little by little this definition is abandoned when the properties of the system become clear, is none other than the procedure of de-ideologization and de-imaginarization. The relation between psychoanalysis and science relies precisely on this common operational status: in order to arrive at a pure mathematical machine we have to get rid of any presumption of signification and relation to an external referent (we have to subtract from any empirical referent). But while psychoanalysis arrives at the point where the subtractive production of a nothingness is guaranteed with a technical procedure of de-imaginarization, mathematics is actually able to make something out of this nothingness: the creative invention of concepts and thoughts. One of the characteristics of modern mathematics is that mathematical entities are introduced by creative definitions that are not linked to any external or empirical given. But in order to reach this domain of subtraction from the empirical realm, we have to undergo a procedure of elimination of the pretension of the Imaginary to reduce the surface to meaning and signification. As Alain Badiou once said at a conference “the problem of mathematics is not that it is too difficult, but rather that it is too simple. It is only letters. It is too much on the surface” (Badiou 2010). The

problem is rather the following: how to inhabit this surface? How to eliminate the ideological profundity of the Self in order to isolate that void that can help us to creatively inhabit the domain of thought? Psychoanalysis is a historical model (certainly open to ameliorations and emendations) that concretely poses this question. Or better stated, psychoanalysis is the political way to produce the subject of the unconscious that is the same as the subject of science.

Appendix B: The Cinema of Straub-Huillet and the Presenting of the Object-Gaze

The reduction of the visual to the Imaginary relies on an illusion: the possibility of an image to be presented as a universal object, identical regardless of the contingency of its place of emergence. Such an image is subjected to the law of the One; it is reduced to an alleged substantiality and permanence. It is thus relegated to the level of a substantialized object – along the lines of the reduction of the world to discrete objects enacted by the operation of imaginary inscription – and the act of vision related to it cannot but be described in terms of an empirical appropriation by the Ego. Against such a reduction of the space of vision to an interplay between two entities (the Ego and the empirical object; the seer and the seen; the *percipiens* and the *perceptum* etc.) psychoanalysis addressed its radical critique.

It is in fact impossible to universalize an act of visual interaction when the permanence of the subject, no less than the permanence of the object, are proven to be an illusionary result of the inscription of the logic of the One. Psychoanalysis, therefore, tried to introduce into this allegedly universalist account a stain of an irreducible singularity. The irruption of a symptom is a contestation toward an alleged reduction of subjectivity to a void and plain surface of the narcissistic Ego. And what is the cut of the object-gaze in the visual space if not an impossibility to reduce the visual to an

appropriative object at the service of the Ego in visual perception? Yet, it is crucial to stress that such a stain of singularity should not be mistaken with a simple irruption of the individual unconscious in what would be otherwise completely reducible to a neutral and objective background. This reading would reduce psychoanalysis to a mere study of individual particularity, in a manner undifferentiated from psychology, a conclusion ruthlessly rejected by Lacan. The French psychoanalyst, in this way, was rather uncompromising in underlining how this asymmetrical intruder represented by *object (a)* did not represent a specific individual obstacle in what otherwise could be reduced to objectivity: such a conclusion would not in fact in any way question the reduction of visual space to an interplay of subject and object. *Object (a)* represents, on the contrary, the conflictual, asymmetrical and in conclusion dialectical nature of visual space itself. It is the visual per se, independent from any individual intrusion, which is inhabited by a radical asymmetry. If ever this ontological premise has a correlate in the experience of the individual when the pretension of reducing the visual to objectivity gets caught in an inconsistency, such as the symptomatic intrusion in visual perception, it should not in any case entail that the latter is the cause of the former.

The recognition of the dialectical nature of the visual has significant consequences for any cinematographic practice. For when such an assumption is considered, cinema cannot limit itself to a mere production of images reduced to empirical visual objects to be passively seen by an abstract spectator. This conviction

acquires an even higher importance when a cinematographic practice somehow intersects with a political reflection, as in the long tradition of revolutionary cinema. And it should not be surprising given that any intervention in the visual field relies on the presenting of an immanent tension in visibility.

Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet represent one of the theoretically most refined and practically most radical experiences within the awareness of the dialectic nature of the visual. Their Brechtian-influenced concern for the pedagogical dimension of cinema relies precisely on the conviction that any intervention in the visual should not appeal to a presupposed audience but rather immanently *creates* its own spectator. In a very similar way in the communist tradition a political collective subject is not the result of a gathering of individuals but rather the opposite: it is from the actions of such a subject that a multiplicity of militants is created. A political gesture par excellence is thus a *pedagogical* gesture, but only if we do not confuse it with a paternalistic education according to which an already self-sufficient theory is explained to proletariats. A theory – for example Marxism – in the moment it gets expressed in a concrete life form undergoes a transformation, in the very same way that in Hegel an abstract idea in order to become itself needs to be concretized, to go outside of itself and to become other-than-itself. The problem of a Brechtian pedagogical method is therefore at the same time to elaborate a life form which incorporates the dialectical nature of the world and a subject able to embody it. It means to be able to create expressive praxis, exemplary gestures

and an alphabet for everyday life exposing a Marxist account of the world and a technique in order to make this encounter possible (Jameson 1998 and Balicco 2008).

A Brechtian pedagogy is in fact a radically horizontal and egalitarian practice. More than being modeled on a school which would preserve an idealistic verticality, it looks like the common effort of a collective subject in order to give form to a new life praxis. In Straub-Huillet's cinema this means that the *mise en scène* of their films, the many months of work they demand from the actors in order to be able to embody the text, their own labor as directors and the proverbial effort that a spectator has to invest when watching their films are all parts of one and the same process of pedagogical change, of embodiment of a new life form. They all equally contribute to make possible the event of a "*mise en commun* of bodies and text" (Rancière 2004).

We can analyze this process from different modes of participation. A spectator of their films, for example, has to face an experience of vision which is practically impossible to find in almost any other kind of cinema of the last thirty or forty years. While in a traditional narrative film an image is inserted in an articulation of frames which provides a very precise production of meaning, their composition of the frame tries to reject any univocal signification. On the one hand, they reduce the image to a minimal sequence of elements with stunning simplicity but, on the other, those very elements are left completely unguided leaving the spectator as an orphan of a hetero-directed mode of interpretation. In an average Hollywood blockbuster, montage is

directed in order to extract from the frame the elements functional to a narrative progression of the film letting the spectator ignore the large majority of what is visible. In order to subject an image to the prerogative of narrative, we are blinded and forced to overlook many things which are – literally – in front of our eyes. As it was effectively stated by Jacques Rancière: “In a way [Straubian] cinema can be qualified as exemplary because everything in it is visible but this is precisely what is puzzling” (Rancière 2004). Straub-Huillet’s subtractive approach is thus, on the contrary, aimed at equalizing the hierarchy of elements inside the frame in a radically egalitarian gesture. The result ends up being extremely faithful to the Brechtian rule of the distancing effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*). The large majority of their films after 2001, for example, have been shot in the Tuscan woods of Buti and they practically share the same natural background as the wildlife. It would seem that using an identical background with a fixed camera for multiple films would entail quite a static experience of vision. But the outcome is surprisingly quite the opposite. Such an aesthetic solution, very soon after a minimal adaptation from the spectator, brings with it an attention to detail that catches minimal changing elements that would have been totally overlooked in a traditional *mise en scène*. Nature continues to change minimally, it is not a neutral background; rather, it is a participating factor: there are the songs of birds and the noises of insects, the cut of light that continues to move, the flow of the river, and so on. These films create, through a collective practice, the possibility for a spectator to construct a mode of

visual experience that at the same time pedagogically makes the emergence of a new subject of vision possible. In Straub's words:

What can a film do? It can help people to look and to hear. Only someone who has learnt how to look and to hear, and how to rebel in that field can achieve a political consciousness. Without that, it's impossible. A film is only a training in order to learn to perceive and nothing more. We have to be aware and humble about it. It is an instrument to educate people to look more consciously and to hear more consciously. If someone who makes films is not able to do this job, it is an impostor, and he should make something else (Straub-Huillet 2001).

But why should such an idea of cinema be the outcome of a collective practice and not just an aesthetic solution brought forward independently by a couple of avant-garde directors? Why would such a cinema be different than any other kind of self-proclaimed political or revolutionary cinema? The Straubs found their practice on a conviction which is crucial for our understanding of non-Imaginary visual spaces. They firmly believe that the labor which is contained in the making-process of the film and the effort made by the spectator as a viewer should be kept together. What matters is not the film as reduced to an empirical object or as an eternal aesthetic statement. They want the process to be co-extensive with the outcome, the artisanal work contained in it to be the same as the pedagogical transformation of the community of viewers. Both parties make a contribution in a collective effort aimed at the concretization of a new life praxis. Their renowned hate for film critics and elitist *cinephiles* is in this regard completely justified, because in the latter approach to film as an object to be discussed and analyzed they reduce a political intervention that has totality as its scope to a reified aesthetic object, in

the very precise sense of reification that is proper to commodity fetishism in capitalism. It is as if faced with the question regarding “how a communist film would look like” Straub-Huillet answer with a different organization of filmic production (and therefore visual space), rather than with some aesthetic choices or formal procedures that belong to the Imaginary. A communist film will not look like anything within a world ruled by capitalism, and with a regime of the visible which undergoes the same mode of production. According to Straub-Huillet, what is possible is, on the contrary, to try to concretize a form of life and a mode of realizing films which has communism as a horizon of realization that in a Benjaminian fashion is both in the future and here and now. In this way what is commonly reduced to a marginal anecdotal idiosyncrasy – the fact that all the workers on a Straub-Huillet’s set are treated equally and paid the same – is a fundamental part of their Brechtian pedagogical approach. In their film, with a remarkable Marxist sensibility, the importance of the process of production and the aesthetic outcome are just as inseparable. It is also precisely along those lines that we have to consider the proliferation of “making-of” documentaries about their shooting

and editing labor: the process through which a film is created is just as important and influential as the film itself.¹⁰

This whole pedagogical approach nevertheless does not go in the direction of a pure transparency of the means of production, nor does it result in an easy communitarian solution. There is no opposition between the means of production and the plane of images. Straub-Huillet's materialism goes in both ways, and the rigor required in order to organize a community of peers is the same rigor that is required in the composition of the image. The underlying ontological premise is that the dialectical conflicts that traverse an image are not dissimilar from the dialectical conflicts that inhabit nature, history and class relations. In such a materialist dialectic of the visual, their mode of intervention will not go in the direction of the dramatization of the conflictual lines but rather in the opposite direction. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's cinema could be considered a perfect example of a subtractive approach. The dialectical asymmetry of the visual should not be assaulted with every possible means but, rather, be reduced to its minimal constitutive elements and rationally presented in its minimal absence/presence. Their cinematographic practice can in fact be seen as a

¹⁰ For example: *Arbeiten zu „Klassenverhältnisse“ von Danièle Huillet und Jean-Marie Straub* (1983) by Harun Farocki, *Les avatars de la mort d'Empédocle* (1986/2010) by Jean-Paul Toraille, *Die Musik seid ihr, Freunde!* - *Danièle Huillet und Jean-Marie Straub bei der Arbeit an ihrem Film Sicilia!* (1999) by Andreas Teuchert, *Sicilia, si gira!* (2001) by Jean-Charles Fitoussi, *Où gît votre sourire enfoui?* (2001) by Pedro Costa, *J'écoute!* (2006) by Giulio Bursi.

progressive elimination of superfluous elements in order to pursue the circumscription of a minimal difference.

The most obvious elimination is everything that concerns representation. Nothing in their cinema alludes to a transcendent absence and therefore nothing is indicated which is not directly present. If everything is present directly, nothing can be *re-presented*. This principle can entail several consequences, the most visible of which is the elimination of any narrative from the film. As Jean-Marie Straub has said: “the main difficulty when making a film is to prevent narration to swallow the images. Otherwise the film wastes all its time to tell a story which in any case would be impossible to tell through images. The films which we are used to seeing on the contrary, pretend to tell stories with images” (Aprà and Spila, 2001). In any encounter with a text (but the same principle is also valid when the encounter is with the music of Bach or with the paintings of Cezanne) Straub-Huillet eliminate all the parts which contain narrative and which are not in the direct speech. Sometimes the indirect speech is converted to a direct speech. The result is a progressive spoliation where a text is morphed into blocks of dialogues (with the exceptions of *Not Reconciled* [Nicht Versönt, 1964-1965] and *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* [Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach, 1967]).

The second elimination regards the referent of a text. Nothing is acted in what is read. The principle is radically materialist and tautological: a text is a text. The model is *Fortini/Cani* (1976), or *Worker, Peasants* (Operai, Contadini, 2001), where the actors do not

even recite a text but directly and explicitly read it. While in *From Cloud to Resistance* (Dalla nube alla resistenza, 1978) or *History Lesson* (Geschichtsunterricht, 1972) the actors still wear costumes. Since *Worker, Peasants*, even this minimal element of “staging” has been eliminated. The direction undertaken is the straightforward elimination of everything related to the context in order for the stories and the words to be left in their purity.

Another important consequence is the use of live sound, which is far from being a mere technical issue. The underlying idea is to bring the consequences of the principle of the pure present of the *mise en scène* to the extreme. The voice is in fact by definition a bodily element which plays a fundamental role in the mode of the concretization and materialization of space within the image. It is possible to “see space” only when hearing the propagation of sound within the environment. When Straub-Huillet wrote a text to the Italian television station RAI in order to present *Not Reconciled* for the first television screening of the film in 1972, they addressed some of these issues while explaining the necessity of subtitles instead of dubbing:

Forcing German characters to talk in Italian is absurd because their movements (not just the movements of their lips) are different from the movements of characters who talk in Italian, and in this film the voices and the different ways of speaking are as important as what they say; ambient noises and sound spaces are also no less important, and all this is impossible to convey with dubbing (Straub and Huillet 1972, 135).

A voice is a continuation of a body outside of the body, and a way of talking is inseparable from a way of moving in space. Straub-Huillet obsessively try to obtain the

maximum of tridimensionality through a very precise work regarding the propagation and the materialization of voice in the surrounding environment. Putting a text into a space means first and foremost finding the point of indiscernibility between voice and space, text and environment, people and nature in order to arrive at the perfect mode of incarnation when in a life form both the concrete and the abstract are indistinguishable from each other. The Brechtian pedagogy of elaborating a mode of life means also the search for a perfect sensible modality for such an embodiment to actually occur in history.

But this constant reduction to the minimal conditions of the image and to its elementary bodily incarnation should not deceive us. Straub-Huillet are neither crude materialists nor minimalists, and all of their solutions are always accompanied in a Brechtian fashion with a movement of distancing and internal separation. In *History Lesson* the Brechtian characters who give the "history lesson" regarding the underlying economical causes which characterized Julius Cesar's political career are preceded by a long sequence where people drive in a car in the packed and chaotic little roads of contemporary Rome. How to reconcile the non rapport between these two sequences? How to combine a tale about ancient Rome's economic/political history with contemporary traffic jams and cars? There is probably not a straightforward meaning that can elevate those two parts of the film toward a combined synthesis: the dialectical distance between the two is doomed to be structural and is impossible to fill. But it is

important to underline the distancing and de-familiarizing acting style that Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet require from their actors: an aesthetic means that characterizes the entire spectrum of their filmography from the very first works in the 60s to Jean-Marie Straub's latest solo films after the death of Danièle in 2006. When they work on a text, Straub-Huillet re-articulate the naturalistic punctuation in order to prevent any form of immediate identification. A text should not be easily elevated to the transcendence of meaning. Actors must not interpret a text – i.e. provide the inert signifiers with a surplus of meaning – they rather have to embody it while preserving its inert materiality. They have to give it a voice without ever erasing the distance between the text and their very voice. As it is written at the beginning of *Not Reconciled* (a quotation from Brecht): “instead of giving the impression the actor improvises, it should be depicted as the truth: he cites a text.” It seems that while refusing any form of mediation in their films their descent into utmost simplicity does not manage to arrive at a transparent and immediate form of presence. Even when a text is none other than a text, its immediate givenness is negated and a minimal distance is preserved within itself. The asymmetrical punctuation is, in fact, the minimal resource that prevents the appropriation of a text to be elevated at the level of a spoken truth. On the contrary, remaining on the plane of its concrete dis-identification, refusing the erasure of its materiality as signifier, is also a way in order to preserve the minimal difference of

dialectic and to avoid closing the gap in order to arrive at a new metaphysics of presence.

We can measure, at this level, in which sense Straub-Huillet's cinema is predicated on a dialectic of a minimal difference. The structural asymmetry of the dialectic of the visual either becomes a nihilistic power of the negative or a minimal act of self-separation. Alain Badiou accounted for these two main orientations in the twentieth century regarding the treatment of the Real (Badiou 2005, 48-57) (as defined in Lacanian terms as the irredeemable difference of the dialectic): the former that assumes destruction as such and undertakes the indefinite task of purification, and the latter that attempts to measure the ineluctable negativity, i.e. the subtractive orientation. Could we really say that Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet are representative of the latter? Is it in the end possible to place Straub-Huillet under a principle of "differential and differentiating passion devoted to the construction of a minimal difference, to the delineation of its axiomatic?" (Badiou 2005, 56).

We already saw how in Straub-Huillet's cinema two movements coexist as partially integrated but which nevertheless respond to two different, and sometimes even opposing, principles: the idea of the un-mediated affirmation of a pure present which is coextensive with the political embodiment of a form of life; and the minimal dialectical withdrawal from a pure presence, expressed in the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* and in the refusal of a symbiotic identification with meaning. In the

development of their cinematographic career these two elements, even though always simultaneously coexisting, are combined in slightly different ways according to various literary encounters, but also to a certain political transformations which even though slowly and subtly occurring nevertheless became visible especially in the films of the Buti period. Despite a discouraging litany of continuity affirmed by the majority of film critics – which has the tone of an “invincible coherence” for the supporters, and of an “unsurpassable arrogance” for the detractors – Straub-Huillet’s cinema underwent some major ruptures and discontinuities in their career of fifty years . And, as it is the case in a kind of cinema which tries to keep together a political pedagogical method and an aesthetic disposition of the image, those ruptures can be detected at both levels: in cinema and in their implicated political consequences.

A first period corresponds to the dialectical years, when the influence of Bertold Brecht constitutes an unsurpassable point of reference and concepts such as rupture, discontinuity, separation between divergent series (images and words, history and life, collective and individual) became figures and allegories of the basic and structural asymmetry of reality: class relations and dialectic. An exemplary film from these years is *Not Reconciled*, one of the most audacious and radical in their entire filmography. In distinction from the majority of their subsequent films, which all have spatiality in a very prominent role, *Not Reconciled* addresses a topic particularly difficult to approach in dialectical terms: time. The words are given by Heinrich Böll’s novel *Billiards at Half-past*

Nine that reconstructs fifty years of German history through the events of three generations of a bourgeois family from Köln. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet entertain an exercise in dialectics and self-distanciation: the continuity of time is constantly split between a re-affirmation and a withdrawal. The Nazi legacy of Germany is uninterrupted and spreads through generations: its seeds were already in the First World War and its offspring are still present in 60s, therefore the political responsibilities continue through the generations. At the same time, the familiar time, which lies beneath the historical one, is constantly ruptured: between siblings (Robert Fähmel and his brother Otto who joined the Nazis, the two “non-reconciled”), between men and women (Heinrich Fähmel and his wife Joanna, with the latter being the only one who has the courage to speak the truth and to risk the *passage à l’acte*), between fathers and sons (Heinrich Fähmel is an architect and constructs buildings, Robert Fähmel is an expert in demolitions and tears them down). But those familiar conflicts all belong to a reified and false register of contradiction and they are all destined to a never-ending spectral continuity modeled on a Hegelian bad infinity. No generation is in fact able to redeem its bourgeois origin: we pass from a coward grandfather, to a nihilistic father to a confused son, but any form of consciousness cannot but be limited and partial (even with Johanna Fähmel). In a novel where all the links between generations are extremely tight with a strong sense of continuity, Straub-Huillet opted for a lacunose selection in the text: many narrative links are left out and the spectator is

unaccompanied through many important passages. Such a solution manages to combine in a precise and sharp aesthetic concept both ruptures – through the many narrative holes which characterized the development of the film – and its continuities – the spectator, in some cases, is not able to tell whether the images are from 1910 or 1940, and sometimes they could be from multiple times simultaneously. Those thematic ruptures are also re-doubled formally in a *mise en scène* where every dramatic and anecdotic element is avoided, leaving the image with a character of “atonality” (Aprà 1966). On top of that, the abstract acting, the distancing punctuation and the “epic” stature (in a Brechtian sense) of the characters help the procedure, which was detected at first by Gilles Deleuze, of a separation and an un-matching between the visual image and the sound image (Deleuze 1998). In all this dialectic of *Verfremdungseffekt* and separation, and of continuity being emptied out from within, the last violent gesture of Joanna Fählmel – the seemingly crazy person of the family, in fact the one who is the closest to truth – stands as a kind of Hegelian “negation of a negation” where the asymmetrical development of the film finds a point of symbolic inscription (in Lacanian terms a *point de capiton*): “only violence helps where violence rules.”¹¹ Or in Brechtian terms, when the collision of diverging series finds a revelatory moment and ends up incarnating in a

¹¹ This sentence is the subtitle of *Not Reconciled* and is a quotation from Bertold Brecht’s play *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* written in 1929.

single concept (which embodies the dialectical scission) the contradictions inherent both to social reality and to the image itself.

The dialectic of aesthetic divergence and dis-identification are operative, even though in every case in a singular way, in every work of Straub-Huillet of the 60s and 70s (most notably in *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* and *History Lessons*); at least until 1978 when a significant moment of change occurs: the discovery of Cesare Pavese in *From Cloud to Resistance* and after a few years the encounter with Friedrich Hölderlin in *The Death of Empedocles (Der Tod des Empedokles oder Wenn dann der Erde Grün von neuem Euch erglänzt, 1986)*. The distance between the subtitle of the latter – “when the earth's green will shine again for you” – and the one of *Not Reconciled* – “only violence helps where violence rules” symptomatically already marks what is at stake in the works of the two French directors starting from these years. While in the 60s the Brechtian pedagogy of communism had always had as a background the harshness of history and class relations, since *The Death of Empedocles* communism will be pursued through a reconsideration of the conflictual relation that opposes man and nature. The *Dialogues with Leucò* by Cesare Pavese, which served as a reference for the first part of *From Cloud to Resistance* (and since the middle of the first decade of this century for many of their long and short features) are, in this way, revealing. When Pavese wrote this book he tried to transpose a historical and political reflection regarding the rise of Fascism in Italy, war, resistance and communism in the trans-historical and eternal confrontation

between man and nature. Greek mythology works in his novel as an archetype in order to expose the communal cultural substratum which defines humanity as such. As claimed by Franco Fortini, Straub-Huillet refused the Pavesian acquiescence toward the ineluctability of cyclical time and terrestrial fatality and addressed “a faith in a slowness of positivity – as a fraternal reciprocal liberation and solidarity – continuously emerging over and under mistakes and defeats” (Fortini 1979). Fortini notes perspicaciously that in Pavese’s terms this would have been called “humanism,” a term radically criticized by the generation after Pavese that in the 60s refused to separate the world between human and not-human and substituted these terms with the ones belonging to Marxism, where the world is divided into opposing classes. What is ironic – Fortini notes – is that the same generation after another fifteen years in the late 70s, during the years of reaction when Marxism went out of fashion, would end up discovering those very mythological and anthropological concepts that Pavese tried to introduce thirty years before. The point is that despite the different intellectual trends, fashionable philosophies and popular theories the tendency to re-think some of those fundamental concepts that defines the relation between humanity and nature is inevitably destined to cyclically come back. It is as if, according to Fortini, any possible thought of resistance cannot but end up dealing with such a fundamental deadlock that defines any possible historical configuration.

In the first *Dialogues with Leucò* in *From the Cloud to Resistance*, the confrontation between Ixion and “The Cloud” has as its main topic the entrance of humanity into history and the inevitability of a confrontation with a limit. It is the topic of human *hubris* and arrogance, and the consequential punishment for the impossibility of having destiny at one’s own disposal. But when in the film we approach the end of the first part, in the last dialogue between a Father and a Son, history emerges and the disgrace of drought is represented as equal to the disgrace of having to confront landlords and capitalists. In the second part of the film, taken from *The Moon and the Bonfires*, history makes its definitive comeback by re-creating a form of divergence between the two parts as occurred in this previous film of the 60s. It is only with the *Death of Empedocles* first, and then even more extremely with *Sicilia*, that Straub-Huillet will more decisively rearticulate their political/aesthetical project as a development of a man-nature relation that does not necessarily have to pass through the dialectical conflicts of history. Hölderlin is in this way a crucial figure: he is seen by them as an announcer of a communism separated from progress and which, therefore, could draw its concretization from a dignified form of peasantry. But here nature nevertheless remains traversed by conflicts and ruptures, and there is a dialectical non-rapport between nature in its mineral-vegetal immediacy and the human words that talk about it. Nature in Straub-Huillet is never an idealized arcadia, it is not a place of isolation and consolation; it is an inhuman nature, traversed by contradictions and dissociations, and

the implicit problem of communism is the possibility of an embodiment of such a conflict in the invention of a new form of life.

With *Sicilia* the dialectical model undergoes a further moment of closure.

Beginning with this film, a pedagogy of a potentially realizable community starts to be delineated. The Brechtian dialectic of dis-identification and withdrawal of meaning begins to leave room for a *dispositif* of agreement between words and the visible.

According to Jacques Rancière, the symbol of such an approach is the character played by Angela Nugara: she incarnates the nobility of the peasants, a nobility and an elevation of speech which does not have anything of working class language. A perfect example of such a transformed aesthetical approach is the episode of the ricotta in

Workers, Peasants:

She tells how it is made, how they come together around it, how it is shared, and we see that all the power of the community is put in three things: first, the savoir-faire, in the sense that, for the Straubs, there is a peasant savoir-faire that is opposed to a vision of socialist engineers or technicians; secondly, the grandness of the ceremony of sharing to which this savoir-faire leads; thirdly, language itself. An elevated culture – which is the culture based on speech – is often opposed to a working class culture – which is based on gesture and artisanal, manual savoir-faire. Now, here, this opposition is refuted absolutely: the same power is in the Ricotta and in the speech that talks about this Ricotta (Rancière 2004).

Instead of a diverging series as in *Not Reconciled* or *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, all the elements are here meant to be combined together. The ricotta become the mediator through which the presence of a community is celebrated. It is interesting to note such a development in their filmography because it makes clear that a certain

pedagogy of the disassociation and divergence, as in the Brechtian films of the 60s, is slowly substituted with a more convergent aesthetical approach where the work with the actors, the embodiment of the text, the surrounding environment, etc., come together in a recovered unity. It is not hard to find in such an outcome a renovated metaphysics of presence of the visual with tonalities that at times can assume a surprisingly Heideggerian flavor. From the awareness of a radical conflictual and dialectical nature of the visual (and its impossibility to be reduced to any form of presence), we arrive at a form of communism that maintains a pedagogical embodiment while forgetting the radical withdrawal from meaning. The films shot in Buti after *These Encounters of Theirs* (*Quei loro incontri*, 2006) cannot but represent a confirmation of such a development (*Le genou d'Artémide*, 2008; *Le streghe*, 2009; *O somma luce*, 2010; *L'inconsolabile*, 2011). The *Verfremdungseffekt* of the asymmetrical punctuation slowly morphed into a sort of unmediated lyricism, the insisted setting of Buti became an out-of-time background able to keep together texts as different as Pavese's *Dialogues with Leucò* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and the choices of the texts completely eliminated history and politics from the picture.

The result is clear: a minimalistic reduction to simple elements when deprived of a dialectical self-distancing, cannot but end up in reducing the conflictual nature of the visual in an epiphany of a transparent community outside of history. The outcome is rather paradoxical: Straub-Huillet who started with one of the most politically radical

and aesthetically rigorous examples of artistic formalization of the visual as a dialectic of minimal difference, end up being reversed into a metaphysics of presence which indirectly advances a possible visualization of the asymmetrical nature of the visual. But it is only when the asymmetrical antagonism is maintained, and when it is inhabited with a radical formalizing passion, that the space of the visible can avoid the idealization of a pure presence and eventually contribute to a possible transmission of knowledge. Dialectical cinema proved to be the privileged door in order to think and to eventually set in motion a possible formalization of the visual.

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