CAN IMAGES BE THOUGHT?

JACQUES LACAN AND FILM THEORY: IMAGINARY, GAZE, MATERIALISM

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Contents

Introduction

FROM IMAGE TO MATTER TO DIALECTIC … AND BACK

What happens when we see an image? What happens when, while going to a movie theater, we are put in front of these mechanical light stimulus that make us perceive what we are believed is a duplicate of the reality that every day we have in front of our eyes? The room is darkened, the projection throws some light in our eyes, and the organs in charge of our visual apparatus are triggered and put to work. The image could therefore be defined as the source of this very physiological stimulus in front of which everyone would react according to their particularity. But the space where the encounter between a human being and an image occurs is far from being a pure "spectator," it rather influences it, over-determines it, thwarts it and re-articulates it. How could we possible claim that our visual perception would end where the boundaries of the image encapsulate its content and enclose it? "The visual" concerns in fact the totality of our space of perception. As it was developed quite perspicuously by the phenomenology of perception we are thrown into vision, we are circumscribed, embraced (but also strangled) by it.

Lacan has a very effective formulation regarding the space where vision occurs: "you never look at me from the place from which I see you."[1] Therefore every single experience of vision is minimally singular in the sense that it encapsulates in a slightly different manner the space of perception. Even when we are sitting at a movie theater, when we are seeing a series of moving-images in front of us in a very similar way of our fellow spectators, the position that we assume is slightly different. Cognitive sciences (but also a little grain of common sense) tell us that every experience of vision is almost imperceptibly different than any other even when it appears to be serial. Even if we are brought to believe that when we look at a movie, the experience that we have is to a large degree compatible with the

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[1] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 1964* (edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan), W. W. Norton & Co., New York – London 1978, p. 103.

one that all the other spectators had, there is always a minimal difference implicated. If cognitive sciences and physiology underline a dimension of visual perception that is unsurpassably singular, Film Studies on the contrary are brought to *believe* that the film that they have to describe and to study is an object with attributes of permanence and substantiality (sometimes they evoke the material dimension of the film in order to prove this position) and that what we see has to a certain degree a *universal* dimension. It would be proven by the fact that we give judgment to an image, we discuss it with other people and we categorize it according to different entries in the history of films etc. Psychoanalysis on which side does it stand? For the singularity of perception or for the universality?

We just recall Lacan's sentence about the singularity of visual perception. In fact it is not just a matter of the impossible co-existence of different point of views, but rather something that entails in a much more profound way the position of the subject. Minimally we always perceive the space of vision in a different way, but this is not only an attribute of the objectivity of space itself, it is also a consequence of the *inclusion* of the subject in it. Psychoanalysis tells us that a human being do not entertain a disinterested relation with the objects surrounding its world: desire, the particular implication of libido (which according to Freud maintain its influence even outside of the strict domain of sexuality), the fact that our phantasmatic formations *makes a difference* in the way we perceive the world, are all variable that can influence in a decisive way our own approach to the visual space. If an eroticized object enters our own space of perception it would inevitably *attract our own gaze* almost as if it were a *trap for our eyes*. Desire operates as a factor of "diagonalization" or "topologization" of the visual field, making it curved, streaked, at the end *different* for each and every one of us. Another proof of that is when this subjective curvature takes over in the form of hallucination or psychotic burst. Space become subjectively loaded to a point where it is almost impossible to distinguish it from a direct emanation of one's own phantasy.

Psychoanalysis thus offers an account of the visual field different than the one of a naïve empiricist description according to which vision would constitute the connection between an active and passive dots in a Newtonian and abstract space. The space of psychoanalytic vision is topological, different for everyone and in a way impossible to universalize. It is unsurpassably singular. But is it really so? And even more, if the psychoanalytic account of vision is so radically influenced by desire and phantasy, how is it that after all we manage to understand each other when we talk about a film or about a visual perception we had?

Interestingly enough the Lacanian reflection on vision takes very different paths. And it has not been underlined enough in the secondary literature how "the visual field" can work in two opposing and conflicting principle in the psychic economy: as a narcissistic imagine at the service of the Imaginary register, or in the Real as an objectual remainder. We will now develop how these two different logic work and operate in very different terms.

It is in the field of vision that according to Lacan there is the possibility to make a consistent One out of the multiple, relative and singular occurrences; it is an image that is able to create the illusion of the consistency of reality. And it is an image as well that is also able to create the fairy-tale of the Ego, i.e. the fact that what we carry around in the world is *one* human being, and not a dispersed and disordered multiplicity of sensations and enjoyments. It is what has been called *the Imaginary*, that is the *form of appearance* of a world. If reality for the majority of cases does make sense; if it is possible to communicate, extract meaning from sentences, exchange communication, information, experiences with other fellow human beings is because we are all somehow led to believe that the visual field that we inhabit is the same for each and everyone of us. The universality of the visual space has the order of a belief, but it is a belief around which every form of known universality is constructed.

When something of this order fall apart, it is because an element of this belief reveals a break. The emergence of a symptom in psychoanalysis is considered the main occurrence that exposes, even if in a contingent or transitory way, the truth about the imaginary: the fact that it was at the end simply a belief, and that

another order of being insists behind it. Usually this occurrence has the *appearance* of a singular event, i.e. of something that is related to what we define as the unconscious; thus something that interrogates us (and makes us suffer) but that on the other hand inevitably concern us not as a universality but only *as* singularities. The subject of the unconscious seems to be a matter of individuality, that is why after all people go to psychoanalysis by themselves and not in a large group of people. It would seem at the end that psychoanalysis would stand as a demystifying procedure, in order to give up not only the main ideologies that characterized the history of human beings (religion, emancipatory politics, revolutionary ideas etc.), but also every form of possible universality and shared common space, if not in the form… of the recognition of the their own illusionary (and at the end vain) form. Is singularity the ultimate word regarding psychoanalysis?

We will try to develop in the following work a different conviction. Not only that psychoanalysis does not stand as a revenge of singularity against the claims of fake and imaginary universalities, but even more that a true universality still has to come, and that in order to evoke it, it will be necessary to traverse the field (and the experience) of psychoanalysis.

Before stepping into the main core of our argument, it is necessary to premise some preliminary remarks regarding psychoanalysis as such. The question of the alternative between singularity and universality otherwise may look deceiving if the context does not get clarified. Psychoanalysis is not an act at the service of the individual who undergoes its experience; its aim is definitely not to comfort the person who chooses it as a treatment. Lacan was ruthlessly clear about it: there is no way to follow the path of the adaptation of human being, for the simple reason that there is no cure for being a human. The only way to "integrate" an individual in the world he is living in, it is through the imaginary, i.e. through its being "an individual" and not a subject of desire. But, contrary to a certain psychoanalytic common sense, a subject of desire is not the "secret" and unmentionable core of one's own personality, it is not the realm of the profound, of the savage, of the indomitable will, of the boundless affirmation of oneself as a persistent pseudo-

romantic heritage would lead us to believe. It is rather an unsubstantial *cut* in the inscription of the One. And therefore it is nothing more than a *cut* that psychoanalysis – as an historically defined technique – will try to produce. If we suspend the representation of psychoanalysis as an experience that would happen between two human beings that encounter each other in certain circumstances, we will actually find that what is at stake is at the same time something more (more ambitious than a simple adaptation at the service of the norm) but also something less (and unsubstantial minimal difference).

Despite its persistent legacy of being considered a discipline of reconstruction of an archeological past, psychoanalysis would rather stand as a *production* of a subject aimed at the future; not the excavation of the primary cause, or the research of some hidden repressed core of authenticity, but the *technical creation* of a dimension that it was not existing before. *The subject of the unconscious can be therefore defined as the worldly consequences of the cut operated on the imaginary regime of the One*. The radical overthrown operated by Lacan is that psychoanalysis ceases to be an instrument at the service of a subject, it is rather what conditions and makes possible the emergence of the subject of the unconscious as such. As it was already clear to Freud himself, unconscious is not an unattainable substance where some alleged primary events are stored, but it is rather a supposition: its existence is not strictly a scientific hypothesis (that needs to be verified), but a pure question. When the first hysterics were treated by Freud in the very last years at the end of the Nineteenth Century, a radical paradigm shift occurred at the level of the epistemology of the symptom. The medical knowledge was based on the idea that a symptom was a physiological occurrence in itself transparent, and the question from the point of view of the medical sciences was caused by the deficiency of our knowledge of the fact. The doctor treated the symptom as an empirical passive phenomenon, while the question that guided his inquiry was the mean through which trying to unpack this event and to bring it back to transparency. Psychoanalysis started from the supposition that this very question was not directed from an active subject of science to a passive fact, but was rather emerging from the phenomenon itself: *the symptom was in-itself a question*. The underlying idea was not going in the direction of a spiritual

causality (the fact that there was a bodily occurrence caused by an immaterial event) but rather that in the causal chain of the physiological events there was a missing link. We are thus sympathetic with Slavoj Žižek conviction that psychoanalysis can lead to a new and renovated form of dialectical materialism, precisely because this inherent materialistic core stands at the very epistemological base of its history. In other words for Freud in the symptom *there was a question emerging from matter itself*, from which a problem would arise: is the individual willing to renounce to the safe and solid ground of the narcissistic Ego in order to inhabit the truth of this question? Or does he prefer to stick to the Imaginary refusal of truth? And given that the individual is inevitably lead to the consistency of the Imaginary, and given that psychoanalysis is not believing in the resources of will: is the technical device of psychoanalysis effective enough and strong enough to engender the downfall of the Ego and the production of the subject of the unconscious? It is also at this level that we have to place the stubborn reference to biology from Freud's part (a reference that many psychoanalysts today still refuse to seriously consider): it is not that symptom is a bodily event that needs to be verbalize, it is rather that the *mute* subject of the Imaginary needs to descend into the materiality of the symptom where a true question emerges.

There is thus another implied reversal regarding psychoanalysis, and it concerns meaning. Psychoanalysis, also because of the success it had in the Anglo-Saxon academic environment in the departments of literature and film studies, in many cases is believed to be a hermeneutic practice of meaning-production and textual analysis. But it couldn't be more far from truth. Psychoanalysis is actually a very refined device in order to decisively *part with meaning*. The problem in a psychoanalytic experience is not so much to elevate (or sublimate) the corporeal occurrence of the symptom toward its level of meaning and signification. It is rather quite the opposite. Precisely because the symptom is *in itself* articulated as a missing link in the necessitated causal chain of material and physiological occurrences that what would be at stake is rather a consistent and effective abandonment of the supposition of meaning. Symptom is a question in itself, *intransitively* so to speak, without the implication of an answer. Thus the problem

is rather how meaning constitutes a persistent shadow that prevents the acceptance of the ambiguity and shattering dimension of matter itself. The descent from the idealist domain of meaning, which is by definition Imaginary and spiritual, into the split and dialectical core of matter, can be also defined in Lacanian terms as what separates the register of reality from the Real.

It is in fact a topic already widely addressed by both Lacan and Freud. The idea of the symptom as a superficial expression of a repressed knowledge that needed to be verbalized and assumed by the subject represents only one side of the coin. What Freud discovered during the Twenties was in fact a much more disturbing and puzzling phenomenon. Many patients after the disentanglement of a symptomatic formation, in most cases achieved after a long time and many efforts, tended to reconstitute a new symptom. There was a strange form of attachment for the cure itself. Or rather there was a sort of paradoxically enjoyment in the very suffering of the symptom. It is from this observation that Freud from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* started to elaborate the notion of *death drive*: a psychic energy that was going against the self-preservation tendency of human being and which did not have any meaning. While symptom were always articulated linguistically and could have been therefore opened to interpretation, drive represented a dimension of *resistance to meaning*. Lacan brought further this conviction especially in the late period of his teaching that goes from the early-mid Sixties to the late Seventies. What he defined with the name of *object a* was in fact a sort of remainder of the meaning-making process of symptomatic linguistic articulation. There was a core in the symptom that did not mean anything, but that it was there only to enjoy.

We can think of this dimension of *object a* (which is actually a point of emergence of the Real in the otherwise Imaginary constitution of experience) also clinically. A symptom is a certain bodily occurrence articulated linguistically: after an interpretation is produced by the analysand,[2] some consequences are created and maybe the symptom itself get morphed into a different symptom. This

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[2] Lacan used to define the patient of an analytic treatment an "analysand" given that it was primarily up to him to carry the duty of the interpretations in analysis.

process can go on for ever, and the interpretation of symptom could always engender some changes in the psychic economy of the analysand. By definition an interpretation cannot be exhaustive given that there is no way to reduce the symptom to its pure linguistic occurrences. But according to Lacan, especially in the latest seminar of his life in the late Seventies, at a certain point it is possible to touch a non-further-interpretable core of the symptom. The different progression of symptom-interpretation-new symptom etc. which does have a metonymic structure of slipping and repetition, can hit a material core. Jacques-Alain Miller, the most important interpreter of Lacan after his death, defined it as the "bone of analysis," but it acquired different names during the years of Lacan's teaching. Another name was *sinthome* (an ancient French orthography for symptom but which has an homophony also with Saint Man), which stands as a certain material kernel un-eliminable and un-interpretable that defines a point of absolute singularity of the subject. The Real as a register of experience is therefore a remainder of absolute materiality that goes beyond any possible symbolization, re-articulation, meaning-production etc. The idea of the circumscription of this non-further-eliminable core goes in the direction of a psychoanalysis as a practice of singolarization. But this is not the only direction where Lacan went after the development of the concept of the Real and *object a*. The Real is singular in fact but it is also and at the same time *transmissible*, and this is the direction where another tradition of Lacanian studies will go. *Object a* has two sides: one is the non-further eliminable core that indicate its materialistic side. But there is also another side which at first could seem almost the opposite, which is its mathematical and formal side. The term *a* should be in fact considered in rather literal terms. It is a variable, as it is defined in mathematic: a value that may change according to the scope of a given problem. The domain of validity of a variable (the set of the numerical values that it can take) is what defines it. *Object a* is a variable in the sense that in the infinite set of concrete objects of desire – the fact that objects of desire for a subject can change during time, move from an object to another etc. – it stands as what defines their "degree of variability." Another name for it is *object-cause-of-desire*: it gives the conditions of appearance of the concrete objects of desire, but it will not prescribe *which*

specific object will be framed as desirable. *Object a*, Lacan said "it is not an object of this world" because it does not have a *direct form of appearance*, but it stands as the transcendental logic sustaining the different appearances of the objects of desire. *Phantasy* – which is the relation entertained by the subject with *object a* – will become at this regard a crucial term in psychoanalysis. It will stand as the analytical construction of the logic of appearance of one's own world. Despite an Imaginary constructed as a pure fake universality, *phantasy* will prove that there is a singular logic of appearance of a world that is always mediated by the relation we entertain with *a*.

This would probably strike us as another proof of the fact that psychoanalysis is above all a critique of every imaginary universality and a construction of a specific mode of singularization. But what interest us at this regard is a specific feature of *phantasy*: the fact that analysis is a mode of *construction* of *phantasy*. Lacan in fact spent many of his late efforts in order to think and define the transmissibility of the experience of unconscious. Despite being a discipline that represented the eminently singular curvature given by desire, Lacan's conviction was that still something at the end could have been transmitted. Psychoanalysis is usually defined for its reluctance of being considered a knowledge like any other. While a standard academic discipline could be formalized and transmitted despite the singular curvature of desire involved, psychoanalysis elevated *that very curvature* to the dignity of an object of study. But given that is impossible to study one's own unconscious because of its constant act of displacement and curvature that engenders, and the impossibility to reduce it to an appropriative object, the only solution is the direct experience of the unconscious. This is the reason why even now in every psychoanalytic associations, psychoanalysis is conceived as something that cannot be simply taught, but it must be directly and subjectively traversed. Nevertheless if we were reducing psychoanalysis to a simple and direct engagement, to a perfect singularity where the unconscious mattered only for the subject directly involved, we would have precluded every possibility of transmission. Here we have to face a crucial theoretical crossroads: is unconscious an *experience* which is first and foremost singular (we can try to transmit it, but we would inevitable fail to reduce to a transmittable language) or

is possible to make it become a *thought*, and as such universalizable? A small, but nevertheless significant tradition of Lacanian studies will choose the second road. It is definitely more demanding, but what is at stake is no less than the possibility of making psychoanalysis not something closed in the strict boundaries of the individuality, but something that do matter in the procedures of transmission of a knowledge. Without reducing a long and rather complex debate to a simplified representation, it is worth to notice that the crucial concept for this understanding of the psychoanalytic mission is *formalization*. Psychoanalysis would not be a form of adaptation of the individual to the universalized norm of the imaginary, but not even the construction of a unrepeatable and un-universalizable singularity: it would rather represent the beginnig of a procedure of formalization of the real. It is a real that does not stand as an external object to be subsequently appropriated by a subject, but it does include the subject in the core of its own objectivity. Sciences at this regards would not stand in a different domain than psychoanalysis, they would rather be part of the same infinite project of formalizing and making transmissible the Real. The counterintuitive aspects of many scientific procedures in the entire history of the sciences renders the very curvature given by the subjective implications in one's own framing of the world a theme constantly analyzed and problematized. The materialistic core of psychoanalysis, its constant skepticism regarding every transcendental production of meaning makes the very notion of transmissibility of the Real a subject matter of primary importance not only for a practice of the unconscious but every discipline that consider the importance of a knowledge of the Real.

Now, why this whole discussion is so crucial for a study of vision, images, films, etc.? We recalled earlier than in Lacan there are two different and opposing way to understand the dimension of vision. *Object a* as a point of rupture of the Real that cut the imaginary One of the universality of the visual space, can emerge in several different registers. Aside of the anal object, the oral object and the phallic object already developed by Freud, Lacan introduced two new objects that will play a crucial role in his theorization: the gaze and the voice. The gaze would stand thus as that obstacle that prevents the visual space to be constituted as objective and neutral. What is interesting is that Lacan was also referring to the

visual level – to the image – when he had to explain the modalities through which the Imaginary constituted itself as a One. We have therefore a double function of the visual that served two opposing principle: one of constituting the Imaginary, the other of breaking it down through the gaze as an irruption of the Real.

Film Studies and especially Lacanian oriented Film Studies epitomized quite clearly the development of the reflection of Lacan on the visual. In the late Sixties and early Seventies when film theory started to refer increasingly more to philosophy and psychoanalysis and when Lacan played the role of a very important reference, the majority of the works were all devoted to analyze the intertwining relationships between Imaginary and Symbolic (we will analyze the work of Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz and Jean-Pierre Oudart but the same reflection could be extended to Jean-Louis Comolli or to the English debate with Stephen Heat, Kaja Silverman, William Rothmann, Daniel Dayan etc.). The image was almost exclusively addressed as an operator of the One of the Imaginary and cinema was analyzed along with the ideological state apparatuses (the other main reference being Althusser) as one of the very devices that contributes to reduce space to a universal neutral background, for example with the elision of the place of subject from the visual field. Such a reductionist account of Lacan in Film Studies has various reasons: in part it was the consequence of a debate that was tackled from a point of view that did not have psychoanalysis as a main theoretical problem, but only as an external reference. The debate on *suture* in the early Seventies was largely misunderstood because of an appropriation that did not take into account all the references and the implications of the debate.[3] In the case of Metz, the semiological influence largely over-determined every reference to psychoanalysis. But more importantly than all these reasons, it should be noted that the majority of Lacan's work was at that time unknown, with the only exception of the *Écrits* published in 1966 but that nevertheless contained texts that were for the main part from the Fifties. The

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[3] Jacques-Alain Miller's text *Suture. Elements pour une logique du signifiant* (published in the *Cahiérs pour l'analyse* in 1966 and main reference of Oudart's intervention which triggered the whole debate), with the exception of Alain Badiou's commentary almost did not have any repercussion within the psychoanalytic debate while it is mentioned in every single article that took part on the debate on the concept of suture on the journal *Screen*.

elaboration of gaze even though developed in a seminar in 1964 will be published in France only in 1973 and it was therefore unknown to all the participant of the debate at that time. In the Eighties, in a completely different context, in the United States and in an academic environment where psychoanalysis started to become again a point of reference in the departments of literature or art, a new wave of reference to Lacan emerged: at the beginning thanks to Joan Copjec and the journal *October* and then because of the large diffusion of Slavoj Žižek work. The main theoretical reference became now the object *gaze* and the register of the Real. The visual will be analyzed as rupture and a moment of radical heterogeneity in relation with the Imaginary.

The problem regarding the reference to the Lacan of the gaze retraces the debate regarding the status of *object a*: whether it would be of the register of singularity or whether it could attest a first step in order to trigger a formalization aimed at the transmission of a knowledge. The problem of the gaze is that paradoxically it negates every form of application for any sort of film analysis. The idea of Lacan is that *gaze* represents a dimension of the visual that is nevertheless radically heterogeneous with regard of the imaginary; thus any form of figuration of its function in the field of the Imaginary would be as a consequence contradictory. But the interesting aspect of its concept relies precisely in this latter dynamic: according to Lacan there is a dimension of vision that while remaining perfectly *inside* the domain of the visual, cannot be imaginarized and therefore seen. The separation between the eye and the gaze negates precisely the possibilities to reduce the domain of the visual to certain universalized descriptive features at the service of the eye. Many Lacanian influenced analysis used the reference to the gaze in the latest years in order to highlight within the filmic text which kind of element could be regarded as heterogeneous with the Imaginary flow of images; but if we want to be faithful to the concept, any possible analysis of the object gaze that do not contemplate the *phantasmatic* dimension (which cannot but be singular) is destined to become an illegitimate (or analogical) appropriation.

What therefore would be the use of such an analysis of the visual if applied to the field of Film Studies or Film Theory? In order to answer this question we should

first ask what would be the status of the discourse on film that we want to pursue. If we want Film Theory to be a discourse *on* film, i.e. a discourse that elaborates a theoretical model in order to categorize, analyze or make a philosophical use of an autonomous filmic text that exist independently from theory, it is clear that the Lacanian analysis of the visual, or any kind of discourse that considers the impossible universalization of the visual field as an unsurpassable horizon, is not of any use. But if we just move the scope of our analysis a little bit and we consider as an object of analysis not the film as such but the *constitution* of the visual field (with all the actors, agencies, subjects involved) the picture becomes quite different. The problem would not be so much to create a discourse aside of the film, glossing its text, and commenting on its formal procedure, but rather to analyze the possibilities in a certain specific condition of the visual field to create a break, and to cut the continuum of the One of the Imaginary. The problem of theory should be not so much the films that we already have, but the coming ones; the ones that do not exist yet; as Deleuze said regarding Straud-Huillet cinema, the films of "a people who are missing," of an audience that still needs to be created. The problem, as psychoanalysis knows very well, is not the individual that enters the studio, but whether a subject could get out from it. Approaching a film as it were an already existing object has the flaw of taken for granted the neutral space within which the film as a relation with an imaginary visual space takes place. The problem from a Lacanian perspective would be: what are the visual strategies, the interventions within the visual field that can make a gaze, as a cut of the One, to emerge? What are the technological devices that can makes the subject of vision (as consequences of the cut of the gaze in the visual field) to emerge?

Deleuze thought that cinema has the potentiality to produce the split between the eye and the gaze in the scopic field. It is the only form of art where the eye of the creator and the mechanical eye that registers the images that will be projected into the screen are not looking from the same place. It is because of this minimal separation that the narcissistic eye in cinema fell apart from its mastery position and the image is able to rely on a pure a-subjective affect (that can lead the Imaginary Ego to fall in a position of anxiety). But again isn't the machinical eye

too similar to the eye of the imaginary; or at this regard isn't any kind of eye (human and not human) relies on a neutralized abstracted space? The problem at this regard would not be to propose a solution (*a single* visual strategy) or a single localization (even filmic localization) from where the break of the Imaginary space will finally occur but to reverse the problem: the problem of the gaze is first and foremost *its impossible localization*. The gaze does not have a localization, and still the problem is to try to abstractedly construct a place for it. Since the Eighteenth Century mathematic and physics developed increasingly refined conceptualization of non-euclidean spaces, through topology, curved surfaces etc. The problem would rather how to try to combine a phenomenological experience of space that still relies on the abstractedness of Newtonian space with a thought of space that abandoned the unity of human perception as a measure. Will cinema be able to help the non-phenomenological subject of vision to emerge? Will cinema be able to sustain the shattering cut of the gaze and to think about its scope outside of the imaginary measure of the One? As the philosopher Ray Brassier stated in a lucid and effective formulation: "Contemporary philosophers can be sorted into two basic camps: in the first, there are those who want to explain science in terms of human experience; in the second, there are those who want to explain human experience in terms of science… I side with those in the second camp."[4] We believe that cinema can be the testimony of a primary (yet crucial) cut in the plane of the Imaginary that can weaken the domain of the One, and in this sense it can still attest an inestimable possibility to lead to a further path of formalization where the unit of measure of human phenomenological experience is definitely abandoned. What is at stake in the emergence of the gaze is none other than the path that lead form the simplicity of the image to the transmissibility of scientific knowledge.

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[4] Nikola Andonovski, *Philosophy is not Science's Under-Labourer. Interview with Ray Brassier*, Thauma Magazine, april 2011, p. 7.

Chapter 1

BETWEEN IMAGINARY AND IMAGES

1.1 The First Session

In every good anecdotic story regarding psychoanalysis, at the beginning, there is always a first session. A formidable account of one of them is what we see in the opening scenes of Patrice Leconte's *Le confidances trop intimes*: a film that is impressively able to catch the contingent and unforeseeable dimension that lies in every encounter between a psychoanalyst and an analysand. Shot as if it were a matter of crime stories, with a thrilling soundtrack and a darkening light, the film begins with a portrait of the very minutes before the first analytic session between a woman and her new psychoanalyst. We see the protagonist, played by Sandrine Bonnaire, walking toward the apartment of the analyst with whom she booked an appointment: a close-up of her walking shoes, the long corridor at the entrance of the building, the shuddering music. Everything seems to underlie the tension of the situation. She approaches the porter to announce herself but she seems to be unable to utter a single word. The porter realizes that the woman is a bit lost and even before the woman is about to say anything (and giving the sense that she knows perfectly well what is going on) she anticipates her asking: "Dr. Monnier? You are searching for Dr. Monnier, right? It's on the sixth floor, second door on the right".

Then we see the woman taking the elevator, getting out from it, going in front of what we are supposed to believe is Dr. Monnier's cabinet door, and while trying to find the courage to finally ring the bell being suddenly anticipated by the Doctor in person who opens the door while sending away the previous patient. Surprised, seeing a woman in front of his door, he asks her: "Do we have an appointment?" "Yes we do – she replies – at 6 o'clock." The man appears to be lost, it does not seem that he was waiting anyone. He looks at his watch and finally let her in. We are informed that the secretary is already gone, cause "she's off-duty." The woman is highly intimidated, as it is common in every first session

when a patient is looking for the first time the analyst's cabinet. She looks very carefully. The camera follows her gaze with a subjective shot, pointing at every visible element of the waiting room. When the doctor welcome her in the studio, he suddenly reproaches her: "you forgot your purse" (seemingly already pointing her to a possible symptom). Then inside the studio she sees a couch and a half-covered magazine on the desk where it is possible to spot part of the title, the word "analys..." The doctor asks her "who did suggest you to come to visit me?" and the typical preliminary conversation goes on. What is interesting in this picture of a rather typical and ordinary first session is that every visible element is confirming the expectations everyone would have regarding an analyst cabinet or regarding the possible conversation that would take place there. But here is the trick: with the further development of the film we will come to know that everything was in fact only a big misunderstanding and every single element was in fact deceiving. The Doctor was only a *financial* analyst, the couch was only serving for making people wait their appointment, the half-covered magazine on the desk was "analyse *financière*," and when he was asking her the typical preliminary questions about her name, her civil status etc. they would equally fit for any kind of professional appointment. The elements that were there confirming her expectations were in fact not confirming anything at all! It were as if all the visual space of the analyst's studio was in fact already overdetermined by her transference, and what it was mistakenly believed to be a confirmation of her own suppositions was in fact only a part of her own suggestions. Her own desire – what would have been at stake in her subsequent analytical experience – *was in fact already there unrecognized from the very beginning*. We have here a typical catch implied in every logic of the beginning: the wait for the beginning to begin, was in fact already part of the beginning itself. There is never a beginning of the beginning, so to speak.[5] Every beginning is only retroactively posed by a second moment when everything is already in motion. The beginning has always already taken place from a subsequent retroactive recognition of it. As if the beginning can be recognized only after it already took place, and never before.

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[5] This point has been taken from Mladen Dolar's seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Jan Van Eyck Academie – Maastricht, session n.1, February 2010.

In any case what this small exemplary scene should be highlighted for is the importance of the visual dimension: something that is involved at the beginning of every psychoanalytic experience.[6] Transference took place even before a proper first session has even started. And a primary point of emergence is the visual level, even before the analysand has even begun to utter a single word and started what is believed to be the proper experience of psychoanalysis (the free-association speech on the couch etc.). Those magazines, couches, corridors that we see in the film and that compose the visual space of the analyst's cabinet are already signs (but Lacan will call them signifiers) that points to a certain signification for the analysand's unconscious.

This relative primacy of the visual is not without its worth of being noticed. Usually psychoanalysis is known for the opposite: an experience deprived of any visual dimension. Images are not directly involved in the therapeutical process, they are rather left out of the cabinet. The "purely talkative" dimension (the famous definition given by Freud of psychoanalysis as a "*talking* cure") is one of the very few rules that were successfully transmitted and accepted by any clinical orientation. When an analysand speaks in a session, he is not supposed to look at the analyst face-to-face, the latter sitting behind his shoulder without nodding or giving any visual signs of direct approval. As it was pointed out by Jacques Alain Miller "the analytic experience brings forward the dimension of the word, not the one of vision: it puts at distance and suspends what James Joyce called the ineluctable modality of the visible."[7] No traces are being read, no Rorschach test is being taken, not even the images of dreams are contemplated, because what matters instead is the fact that they are narrated through words.

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[6] Interestingly, even though not completely surprisingly, in the documentary *La Premiere Séance* (Gerard Miller, 2009) and in the World Association of Psychoanalysis (WPA) conference "Your first Session… Entering Analysis" held in Paris on May 1 and 2 2010, both devoted to the experience of the "first session," many accounts of different analytic first experiences revolved around a visual dimension. Sometimes these primary visual observations even went on and played a primary role in the future construction of the fantasy during the treatment (for example in many cases the analyst's cabinet played a role).

[7] Jacques-Alain Miller, *Dall'Immagine allo sguardo*, in Scuola Europea di Psicoanalisi – Sezione Italiana, *Immagini e sguardi nell'esperienza analitica*, Astrolabio, Roma 1996.

On the other hand images cannot be completely rejected from the experience of psychoanalysis: fantasy, narcissism, the image of the fetish, visual hallucinations are all fundamental parts of it. But even more than that, images have a specifically important place in the teaching of Jacques Lacan, who started his famous "return to Freud" exactly with an image: the one reflected in the mirror.

1.2 «In the beginning… was the mirror»

As Lacan himself recalls in the introduction of the *Écrits*, it was at the Congress in Marienbad (August 3, 1936) that his "first pivotal intervention in psychoanalytic theory took place."[8] The occasion was his first visit to the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) Congress in a very delicate conjuncture for the history of the institution.[9] The legacy of Freud – who at that time was already old and sick and would have died only three years after the congress – was still highly disputed between different clinical orientation, the main ones being represented by Anna Freud and Melanie Klein (vehemently confronting each other, with Ernest Jones, president of the IPA at that time, as an intercessor in favor of the latter). Even though Lacan was theoretically much closer to Melanie Klein than to Anna Freud's move toward Ego Psychology, what prevailed was his ultimate exclusion from the political and theoretical battle occurred during the congress. His intervention is reported to have been almost completely ignored and there is no signs of him being a main interlocutor of the debate. During his talk he would not even be allowed to conclude his intervention when Ernest Jones interrupted him in the middle of a sentence. Years later he would still recall this moment:

> *I duly presented it at the Marienbad Congress in 1936, at least up to the*
> *point, coinciding exactly with the fourth stroke of the ten-minute mark, at*
> *which I was interrupted by Ernest Jones who was presiding over the*

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[8] Jacques Lacan, *On My Antecedents,* in Id., *Écrits* (translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg), W. W. Norton & Co., New York – London 2006, p. 57.

[9] Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan. Profilo di una vita, storia di un sistema di pensiero*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 1995, p. 115 [my translation].

congress. He was doing so as president of the London Psycho-Analytical Society, a position for which he was no doubt qualified by the fact that I have never encountered a single English colleague of his who didn't have something unpleasant to say about his character. Nevertheless, the members of the Viennese group who were gathered there, like birds right before their impending migration, gave my expose a rather warm reception[10]

According to Elisabeth Roudinesco the "warm reception" allegedly received was only a sign of misunderstanding (or courtesy from the audience), given that almost no signs of Lacan's intervention were left in the debate or in future references of the congress: "to the eyes of the great disciples of the Freudian epoch, who at Marienbad were indulging in their Shakespearian turbulences, the little French was simply unknown."[11] In fact the theses developed by Lacan in 1936 – even though at an early stage compared to his subsequent development – were certainly critical toward the institutional debate of the IPA:

The debate between Loewenstein, Odier, Parcheminey, Paul Schiff, Lagache and Marie Bonaparte was revolving around the comprehension of the second topic and the notion of adaptation. Even then Lacan was claiming vigorously a central point of his future system of thought: 'man does not adapt himself to reality, he rather adapts the latter to himself. The Ego creates the new adaptation to reality and we try to maintain the cohesion with this double.'[12]

More than a theoretical hostility, it was rather a lack of understanding or even a plain distance in terms of language, sensibility and cultural background. Lacan was one of the very first analysts who came from a different cultural and theoretical background compared to the post-Freudian generation. Within an audience of strict psychoanalytical and medical training he was merging his

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[10] Jacques Lacan. *Presentation on Psychical Causality*, in Id., *Écrits*, cit., pp. 150-151.

[11] Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan. Profilo di una vita, storia di un sistema di pensiero*, cit., p. 123 [my translation].

[12] *Ibidem*.

clinical research with his surrealist acquaintances or with the most advanced philosophical thought of his years (the attendance of Kojève's seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology* played a crucial role in his early years).

An early and primary example of an attempt to renew the post-Freudian generation of the Thirties can already be seen in the topic chosen by Lacan for his intervention in Marienbad. It is arguably the very first brick of his long theoretical practice that lasted for more than forty years, and from that theme it is already possible to glimpse some of the originality that characterized the subsequent research that Lacan developed along the century: the *imaginary constitution of the Ego in the image of a mirror*.[13] Interestingly enough, Lacan begins his intervention in the field in psychoanalysis with the study of an image.

In order to develop the concept of "mirror stage" Lacan refers to an episode frequently confirmed by any phenomenological observation of an *infans:* still uncoordinated ("outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence"), a baby, when placed between six and eighteen months in front of a mirror, not only recognizes himself in the reflected image but also starts to develop with it a jubilatory and euphoric relation. A main reference for this argument – even though Lacan somehow does not give him the credit he deserved in the text included in the *Écrits* –[14] is the French psychologist Henri Wallon who first underlined the need for the *infans* to apprehend its "proprioceptive ego" through an "exteroceptive image." The observed event seems a minor one, but its theoretical consequences are difficult to underestimate. What is at stake in this small familiar anecdote is the relation of an individual with his own body and the

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[13] The text "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function" was famously re-written many times and under different circumstances and it was also diversely commented by Lacan himself along the years of his teaching. The version included in the *Écrits* is not specifically the one presented in Marienbad in 1936 but it is reported of having been delivered on July 17, 1949, in Zurich at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis. According to Lacan's biographer Elisabeth Roudinesco there are good reasons for believing that the two version were not substantially different from each other.

[14] "I had not awaited that moment to meditate upon the fantasies through which the idea of the ego is apprehended, and if I presented the "mirror stage" in 1936, when I had yet to be granted the customary title of analyst, at the first International Congress at which I had my first taste of an association that was to give me plenty of others, I was not lacking in merit for doing so." Jacques Lacan, *On My Antecedents,* in Id., *Écrits*, cit., p. 57.

way through which the autonomous perception and recognition of it (in the early days after being born the body of a baby is still fused with the body of the mother) emerges. Lacan's conviction is that an experience of a body as a self-recognized object would not rely on a primary symbiotic conjunction between a living body and a subject of apprehension, it would rather be the byproduct of the *separation* of the two: i.e. the externalization of the body itself *as* image. The body is recognized as such not through its corporeal senses, but rather through its *visual* properties, for it is first and foremost *stuffed with visuality* rather than flesh and blood:

> *Between the immediate experience of things and their representation, a dissociation necessarily intervenes that detaches the qualities and the existence proper to the object from the impressions and the actions in which it is initially implicated, by attributing to the object, among other essential traits, those of exteriority. Representation is possible only at that price. The representation of the body proper insofar as it exists, necessarily satisfies that condition and can be formed only through self-exteriorization.,.. The whole work [of the child] therefore consists in the child's giving himself images of himself analogous to those he can form outside himself, and which, moreover, he can form in no other way.. . . For it is in the nature of images to belong to space.[15]*

In the moment when he recognized the image of itself as externally reflected, the baby has not yet mastered walking, or even standing. Every human animal suffers from a premature birth and from a radical biological instability ("histologically, the apparatus which in the organism plays the role of the nervous system […] is not complete at birth"[16]). We are not very far from what Stephen Jay Gould defined as neoteny, a "retention of formerly juvenile characters by adult

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[15] Henri Vallon, *Les origines du caractere chez Venfant*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1949, pp. 172-173.

[16] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954* (text established by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by John Forrester), W. W. Norton & Co., New York – London 1991, p. 149.

descendants produced by retardation of somatic development"[17] proved also by the fact that "human baby is much more dependent on his mother – and the other adults around him – than the baby of any other primate."[18] The externalized image of the body plays a proper illusionary role and thus gives the baby the mirage of being able to be in total control of the movements of his body during a stage of his development when he is biologically not capable of that. This phenomenon should in fact be better understood with the psychoanalytic term of *identification*, i.e. "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image."[19] The image seen in a mirror, far from being a purely *reflection* of something that is supposedly already there in the development of the child, should be rather understood as *constitutive*, its effect being *productive* and not merely *passive*. Here we find one among the many paradoxes that characterizes the constitutional dimension of the image: *for the mirror does not mirror anything*. The impression of it as simply mirroring is already part of the illusion according to which the portrayed image is reflecting something which is already there from the beginning, and what the child sees in the shape of an image is effectively part of the reality of his own body; while on the contrary – we know – it is merely fragmented and out of control. In other words the "mirror image" *creates*, with the help of a productive illusion, a gap between what is biologically underdeveloped and what is, on the contrary, believed to be unitary and in potential control by the *infans*. The illusion is intoxicating for the baby who, in front of the mirror, cannot but jubilating and play with the reflected image of itself: this experience creates a mental dimension that is in dis-agreement with his biological status. It is this hallucinatory deception that will be defined by Lacan as *imaginary*, i.e. the register of psychoanalysis that goes the closest to what is commonly named as reality. It is the function of the imagos that establish a relationship between an organism and its reality, its *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.

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[17] Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1977, p. 483.

[18] Lorenzo Chiesa, "The World of Desire: Lacan Between Evolutionary Biology and Psychoanalytic Theory," in *Filozofski Vestnik*, vol. 30, n. 2, 2009, p. 85.

[19] Jacques Lacan, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the* I *Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*, in Id., *Écrits*, cit., p. 76.

Lacan makes also sure to underline the temporal dialectic that is involved in the mirror stage – "a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation" – from which the subject is caught in fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to the "orthopedic form of its totality."[20] The problem is that the latter will never manage to cover completely the fragmented nature of the body itself, that will re-appear in dreams in the form of disconnected limbs or organs exoscopically represented. For the mirror stage is not something that matters only in the development of the child between six and eighteen months, but it rather constitutes the core of a problem around which all the subsequent identifications and the fate of the concept of Ego will be centered. Lacan main insight in this early and seminal text can be summarized as follow: the unity of the Ego is something that is, on one hand, at the same time illusionary and defective, but above all (and somehow crucially for the sake of our discussion) *visually* produced. In the register of the imaginary there is a predominance of the visual functions.

However which kind of visuality is here implied? While the mirror can give the idea of an optics based on the model of the reflection, it does so only from the point of view of its own misrecognition. The visual lines do not go from the eye to the mirror and then back into the eye, but rather from the mirror to the eye. The eye, unable to recognize the proper causation of its own vision ends up believing in a reversed movement, where what is seen in the mirror is merely the reflexive circle of the eye looking at itself. On the contrary in the "mirror stage" it is the *eye itself that is established by what it sees* rather than the reverse: "the *perceptum*, while remaining the object of a subjective *perceptio*, has once more become, in the form of a 'visual *Gestalt*,' the ideal foundation of the gaze directed toward it."[21] It would be therefore the mirror (or the *Gestalt* image) that *founds the gaze that is subsequently looking back at it*. As a consequence we have here a *reverse reflexivity*, where the impersonal gaze is *looking at itself* through the misrecognition of the imaginary subject (caught in the illusionary circle of himself

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[20] *Idem*, p. 78.
[21] Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan. The Absolute Master*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1991, p. 63.

looking at himself through the passive reflexivity of the mirror). The same point was also made by Merleau-Pony according to which there is a second and "more profound sense of narcissism" that is developed precisely in this reverse and surprisingly *passive* model: it is not the individual who sees in the mirror but rather "the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passive"; "not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom."[22]

This optical model remains here rather implicit and it is not yet fully developed by Lacan at this point of his teaching. We will see it coming back with the theory of the object-gaze during the mid-Sixties where the dimension of the heterogeneity of the vision regarding the register of the imaginary will gain a primary, and quite original, importance.

1.3 When the image is an other

The misleading movement of the imaginary subject who believes in the unitary dimension of himself – through the *detour* of the identification provided by the image – has a long and tortuous history in psychoanalysis that is none other than the debate surrounding the concept of narcissism. It is Lacan himself who connects the visual constitution of the Ego, as it is developed in the intervention on the mirror stage, with the Freudian study of narcissism in the central lectures of *Seminar I* on *Freud's Papers on Technique*. We already saw how the (mis)recognition of the mirror imagine of himself by the baby anticipates in an imaginary fashion the unified shape of his body. But because of the gap that the image creates between the unsurpassable horizon of the baby's biological immaturity and the illusionary mastery of the movements of his own body, this very image cannot but appear as the image of someone else. A profound distance

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[22] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1968, p. 139.

is installed in every human being between the real of his own being (the fragmented and neurophysiological dimension of his prematurely born body) and the image that, he will assume, regards himself. From such an occurrence a whole dialectic of aggressiveness, competition and jealousy emerges in the imaginary relation of any human being with the image of himself and his fellow man. It is narcissism in the strict sense of the myth, for it indicates "the imaginary death"[23] and the dispossession that the subject bear within itself when confronted with the image of himself/other.

An example of the aforementioned *foreignness* regarding the narcissistic image of the Ego can be derived from the clinic of obsessional neurotics where the subject is wholly replaced by an illusionary image of himself until the point of a total dissimulation of the real of his own desire:

> *Whatever he tells you, whatever feelings he brings to you, it is always those of someone other than himself. This objectification of himself isn't due to an inclination or to a gift for introspection. It is to the extent that he evades his own desire that all desire to which, were it only ostensibly, he commits himself, will be represented by him as the desire of this other self that is his ego.[24]*

What is proper to an obsessional neurotic is in fact a common feature of every linguistic discourse when deployed along the axes of the imaginary register. A speech given by an analysand in a psychoanalytic session remains at the level of the imaginary until a cut is performed (it can be the cut of a slip of the tongue, an unpredictable *witz* or simply the unforeseeable intervention of the analyst). A discourse not underpinned by the unconscious (i.e. by an element heterogeneous from the imaginary register) is inevitably a discourse of someone else, i.e. the discourse of a stranger, or better said, the discourse of the image of the Ego. Unless the unconscious cuts the flow of the speech, the words of an analysand

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[23] Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955* (edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Sylvana Tomaselli, with notes by John Forrester), W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1988, p. 268.
[24] *Ibidem*.

remain at the level of the imaginary and they are therefore words that do not originate from the subject but from the alienated image of the Ego. The fundamental alienation in the image of the Ego is hence a common everyday experience of first-person everyday language, meaning, identification etc. An obsessional neurotic is dethroned by an image who takes his place, and the price he is very happy to pay is the ultimate vanishing of the real of his own desire:

> *Before enabling him to recognize the fundamental aggressivity which he disperses and refracts into the world, which structures all his object relations, he must be made to understand what the function of this fatal relation he maintains with himself is, which makes it such that as soon as a feeling is his he starts annulling it. If an obsessional tells you that he doesn't care for something or someone, you can take it that it touches him to the quick. When he expresses great indifference, that is when his interest is caught at its maximum.* [25]

A true obsessional posture is a perpetual denial of desire ("as soon as a feeling is his he starts annulling it") and an indefinite split in different images where – according to the model of the bad infinity – an identification is substituted by another one, then another… and so on: a process virtually infinite as long as an intruder does not break the unifying principle of the image. A fundamental dialectic of alienation, obvious in an obsessional neurotic but common to any imaginary relation, is destined to be caught in a continuous and ambiguous dual relation where a polarity of discordant pieces and a polarity of merged unity do not have a point of mediation and are therefore doomed to repeat themselves forever. Lacan defines it as an *impasse*: a close-circled dialectic of jealousy-sympathy that is expressed in traditional psychology in the "incompatibility of consciousness."[26] When an Ego entertains a specular relation with a fellow Ego – with whom it engages a "fight for pure prestige" – there is a never-ending bad infinity where the One is passing into the Other and the Other is passing into the One but where there will never be any moment of possible overcoming of the

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[25] *Idem*, p. 269.
[26] *Idem*, p. 51.

terms of the relation. In a relation of such a kind it is mandatory for death to remain unrealized, otherwise the whole dialectic would cease for "lack of combatants."[27] In fact imaginary and imagined death are constitutive parts of a narcissistic relation. An obsessional neurotic instead of confronting the void of his desire prefers to engage in a never-ending confrontation with his alter-Ego that, especially because it will be never be possible to be resolved, cannot but be part of an infinite circle of aggressiveness and frustration. It will be on that base that Lacan will develop the dialectic of desire: "an ego which hangs completely on the unity of another ego is strictly incompatible with it on the place of desire."[28] When confronted with a desired object, "it is either he or I who will get it, it has to be one or the other. And when the other gets it it's because it belongs to me."[29]

1.4 Narcissism and the topic of the imaginary

1.4.1. The duplicity of libido and the construction of the Ego

Freud deals with the issue of the imaginary narcissistic relations in 1914 in *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, a text of capital importance regarding which it will never be enough to stress the theoretical and clinical relevance. Written only a few months after his harsh theoretical confrontation with Carl Gustav Jung, and the resignation of the latter from the International Psychoanalytic Association, *On Narcissism* is at the same time a polemical intervention and a theoretical reconsideration of some of the basic building blocks of Freudian psychoanalysis; particularly regarding the theory of drives, an argument that will mark many divergences among Freudian generation and after his death within the psychoanalytic community. It is through a brief commentary of this text (also extensively addressed by Lacan during *Seminar I*) that we will be able to better frame the importance of the constitutive role played by the Ego in a psychoanalytic theory of the image.

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[27] Jacques Lacan, "Le mythe individuel du névrosé," in *Ornicar?*, n. 17/18, 1978, pp. 306-307.
[28] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, cit., p. 51.
[29] *Idem*, p. 51.

Freud in the aforementioned text adopts one of his more peculiar methodology: isolating a particular pathological diagnosis (a perversion characterized by the choice, as an object of love, of one's own body and not of an external object) in order to highlight a structural account valid for every subject ("Once more, in order to arrive at an understanding of what seems so simple in normal phenomena, we shall have to turn to the field of pathology with its distortions and exaggerations"[30]). Since his 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Freud postulates the existence of a primitive auto-erotism from which a subject will construct his own instinctual progress through the repartition of psychic energy along different kind of objects of the world. Lacan refers at this regard to an essential relation maintained by the animal being with his *Umwelt*. It is in fact a strictly dualistic logic where sexual libido is always expressed from a subject toward an external object in the world. But even more strikingly it should be noted that there is no difference according to this account between the relation that a subject entertains with the outside world in instinctual terms (nutrition, hunger, thirst etc.) from the *specific* logic that is implied in libido ("if the libido is not isolated from the entire range of functions for the preservation of the individual, it loses all meaning"[31]). It is because of this fundamental problem regarding the first Freudian description of drives that Carl Gustav Jung will claim to have renounced the sexual characterization of libido and to have substituted it with a more general notion of psychic interest. The pivotal argument which is at stake in this debate is none other than the *dualistic* notion of drive that – once renounced, as in the case of Jung – ends up with a monism where drive is reduced to a "property of the soul, the creator of its world."[32] Even though Freud will thoroughly reconsider his theory of drives – not only from *The Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* to *On Narcissism*, but also subsequently in the texts included in *Metapsychology* and even later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* –

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[30] Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, electronic version of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (translated by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson), Hogarth Press, London 1956-1974, p. 2938.
[31] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, cit., p.114.
[32] *Ibidem*.

one point he will always consider it as undisputable and impossible to renounce: the radical dualism and imbalance implied in the notion of drive. The latter is a rather decisive trait in order to resist the psychological temptation to assimilate drive to an animal remainder still present in human being (an interpretation mistakenly suggested in the majority of Freud's early translations where the notion of *Trieb* is commonly translated with instinct).

During the observation of schizophrenics Freud recognizes that the retention of their investments in the world outside of them is qualitatively different than what an hysteric or an obsessional neurotic would do. For the latter their abandonment of reality do not entail an abandonment of the erotic relations they entertain with objects and persons. A schizophrenic on the contrary has a dis-investement from the world that is not substituted by any fantasmatic objects while his libido is entirely directed toward himself. At this point Freud wants at any costs to keep two properties of drives intertwined and connected: on one hand the radical dualistic nature of their logic, on the other hand their strict energetic equivalence. In other words the two terms need to be clearly distinguished on a *qualitative* level but at the same time they need to be maintained equivalent from the *quantitative* side of the energetic description. In the case of schizophrenia the libido subtracted from the external world – while remaining qualitatively sexual – is thus directed toward the ego producing what Freud defines as a narcissistic behavior. However a narcissism emerged from a following re-appropriation after a retention from objectual investments, cannot be reduced to an *originary* narcissism: that is reason why it is very precisely defined by Freud as "secondary." Lacan here underlines quite perspicuously what seems to be lateral aspect that will nevertheless end up playing a key role: the Ego, far form being something already present from the very beginning in the objectual relation of an individual, it is rather a matter of *construction* and appears only in a secondary moment; while the auto-erotic instincts – which are in nature non narcissistic – are there from the very beginning. At this regard Freud does not leave any doubt:

> *I may point out that we are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be*

*developed. The auto-erotic instincts, however, are there from the very first;
so there must be something added to auto-erotism - a new psychical action -
in order to bring about narcissism.*[33]

Lacan makes use of this insight in order to underline the historical appearance of
the imaginary Ego in a *certain* point of the individual history: the fact that it is
produced. It is a psychical action where a gap is created in the human animal by
the impossible encounter between a biological immaturity and the captivating
Gestalt of a unified body, i.e. the "mirror stage":

> *Those of you who are somewhat familiar with what I am putting before you
> will see that this idea confirms the usefulness of my conception of the
> mirror-stage. The* Urbild*, which is a unity comparable to the ego, is
> constituted at a specific moment in the history of the subject, at which point
> the ego begins to take on its functions. This means that the human ego is
> founded on the basis of the imaginary relation. The function of the ego,
> Freud writes, must have* eine neue psyehische Aktion, . . . zu gestalten*. In
> the development of the psyche, something new appears whose function it is
> to give form to narcissism. Doesn't that indicate the imaginary origin of the
> ego's function?*

The Ego represents a contradictory instance of mediation between the fragmented
biological immaturity (a multiplicity in dispersion) with the illusionary and
mesmerizing One-ness of an image. It is a mediation created during a certain
stage in the history of the individual that should not be confused with the primary
auto-erotic instincts (a point emerged clearly in the Lacanian intervention of the
"mirror stage"). The very modalities through which this instance will be (more or
less successfully) created will define the objectual relations in the subsequent
development of the individual. The Ego is therefore not an illusionary outside that
regulates and disciplines a disorderly reality made by fragments but rather the
reason of what Lacan will define as a structural *"non-rapport,"* an always
problematic encounter between two instances that lack a common ground. The

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[33] Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, cit., p.
2934.

Ego would be therefore the tentative inscription of this encounter (we will later define it in the last chapter as a *formalization*).

It should also be noted that in *On Narcissism* there is a shift in the development of Freud's thought that marks an important step from the "first topic" of the beginning of the century in the direction of the "second topic" of the Twenties. A topic is a tentative figuration of the relations between an individual and the unconscious. Freud elaborated two topics: a first one expressed in terms of unconscious, conscious and pre-conscious (with two opposing principles regulating the psychic logic: the pleasure principle and the reality principle); and a second one that will mark the transition toward the schema of Id, Ego and Super-Ego. A main difference among the two can be detected in the specific role played by the Ego: while in the first topic the Ego is completely absorbed in the reality principle (and figuratively it is positioned outside of unconscious mechanisms), in the second one the difference between conscience and unconscious is rather blurred, and the Ego will be even recognized as being partially overlapped with the Id, or rather laid down upon it as it is shown in the famous drawing included in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). The effects of the unconscious extend their influences in the realm of the Ego itself. As underlined by Lacan, Freud "introduced his theory of the relations between the Ego and the Id expressly […] to extend the field of our ignorance, not of our knowledge"[34]:

> *We shall now look upon an individual as a psychical id, unknown and unconscious, upon whose surface rests the ego, developed from its nucleus the Pcpt. system. If we make an effort to represent this pictorially, we may add that the ego does not completely envelop the id, but only does so to the extent to which the system Pcpt. forms its surface, more or less as the germinal disc rests upon the ovum. The ego is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it.[35]*

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[34] Jacques Lacan. *Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation*, in Id., *Écrits*, cit., p. 560.
[35] Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, cit., p. 3958.
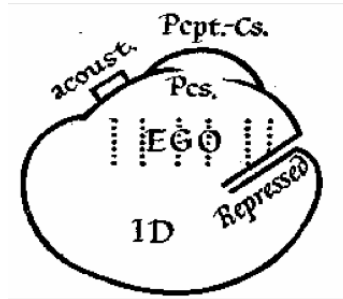
Even more strikingly in *The Ego and the Id* Freud also comes at the conclusion – later, as we have seen, also recuperated by Lacan – that the Ego is fore and foremost a "body-ego," not merely reducible to a surface but rather to "the projection of a surface."[36] In the very same way where the unifying image of the imaginary body was illusionary projected from the mirror to the real of the individual.

1.4.2. Imaginary, reality, psychosis

As it happens many times with concepts coined by Lacan, their commonsensical understanding appears to be rather deceiving, if not in many cases utterly wrong: imaginary is one of these terms where the apparent meaning has very little to do with the *function* that it has in the structure of Lacanian psychoanalytic thought. Imaginary much more than indicating a dimension of escape and distance from reality as commonly conceived, should be rather understood in quite literal terms, as that which has *the stuff* of an image. But the latter image far from installing itself over an already-made reality in a purely representational way (where it would simply and passively reflects an outside) has rather the function of *composing* this very reality through the captivating lure of itself. If commonsensically, image is conceived as an illusion that emerges from the conditions of reality, here we have rather the reverse: the conditions of reality themselves as being created by the self-reflective materialistic movement of an

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[36] *Idem*, p. 3960.

illusion.

The problem in question is thoroughly analyzed by Freud in *On Narcissism* when he has to differentiate the retention from reality that occurs in a psychosis from the one occurring in a neurosis. A neurotic withdraws himself from reality in the very same way that a psychotic does, but differently than him he still inhabits the register of his formative identifications. On the contrary when a psychotic loses the hold of reality, the effect of de-realization occurs precisely because of the lack of an imaginary support. Against a common idea according to which a psychotic subject dwells in an illusionary space of dreaming, we have here quite the opposite: the effect of collapse of reality occurs not because of an escape from it, but rather as a consequence of the lack of an imaginary grip (that, we should not forget, even though not completely reducible to an illusion, it is made by "the stuff" of an illusion). The structural difference between these two positions highlights a very important point: the effect-"reality" is absolutely placed on the side of the imaginary. De-realization is never a problem of retention from reality, it is rather a defective imaginary/illusionary support. The status of the image is therefore structurally indispensable in order to *compose* a unified appearance of reality as a One. We will later come to see that the logic of the imaginary serves the purpose of dissimulating the cut and the binary division brought forward by the irruption of the negativity of the signifier. The One of the image is operative in order to oppose the Two of the binary signifier, and in doing so it needs to vehemently and surreptitiously hide any form of asymmetry or break, and to keep the illusion of the persistence of the One. The dialectic of the One, if isolated from the underlying trauma of the signifier, appears to be a pure self-effacing successful achievement where the illusionary and captivating dimension of the image appears to create by itself the being-One of the body (and even the very gaze from which the body itself mistakenly believes in its own reflection in the mirror), and also the being-One of reality. If a neurotic withdraws from reality but he is still inhabited by the logic of the imaginary One, the captivating dimension of the visual is still entirely operative. It is only with the retention from the imaginary, and with a break from the false illusion of the One that a register incompatible with the imaginary can emerge.

1.4.3. The Image of Biology

When in *On Narcissism* Freud starts to test, and then later to put into question, the division between sexual drives and Ego drives – i.e. psychic energy devoted to sexuality and psychic energy devoted to the individual self-preservation – he evokes quite an enlightening biological reference. Freud claims that every individual does in fact "carry on a twofold existence: one to serve his own purposes and the other as a link in a chain, which he serves against his will, or at least involuntarily."[37] While sexuality can be considered as one of his own ends, he also serves the purpose of the perpetuation of his biological germ plasm at the service of a propagation of the species. Man would be therefore inhabited and parasitically hijacked by a purpose that he has nothing to do with, but that nevertheless structures his whole libidinal economy. We have here a reflexive split inside of the libidinal economy between two different rationality: one that goes in the direction of an immediate satisfaction, the other that uses the former in order to obey to its own biological task.

According to Freud the fundamental contrast between the requirement of the preservation of the individual and the requirement of the continuity of the species strangely mirror the relation between Ego drives and sexual drives, and their conflicting movement toward pleasure and individual self-preservation. Interestingly enough though, it is sexual drives here that obey the egotistic logic of the procurement of pleasure, while the Ego (and therefore the captivating image of the body) is at the service of the propagation of the species *even against the will of the individual*. There is an almost perfect reversal from the Ego as a function of self-preservation, and sexuality as an instance obeying to the disconnecting dimension of the pleasure principle (as it was developed in the *Three Essays on the theory of sexuality*): here it is rather the Ego itself that is caught in an anti-vitalistic and parasitic logic of being a pure instrument of biological rationality at the expenses of the self-preservation of the individual. We

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[37] Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, cit., p. 2935.

can see that another step is taken by Freud in the direction of an understanding of the Ego (and the imaginary register) not as a pacifying instance of conscience (or even repression), but rather as a thwarting and instability factor not completely foreign to the logic of the Id. A step that – we have already seen – will be taken definitely in the transition to the second topic in *The Ego and the Id*.

Lacan adds in his commentary a reference to the theory of Weissman, who posits the existence of an immortal substance made of sexual cells that perpetuates the species through a continuous reproduction of themselves via the germ-plasm. The individual would be just a parasitic lateral deviation from a genetic program aimed only at the support of the never-ending reproduction of the germ-plasm:

> *What follow from endorsing the Weissmannian notion of the immortality of the germ-plasm? If the individual which develops is quite distinct from the fundamental living substance which the germ-plasm constitutes, and which does not perish, if the individual is parasitic, what function does it have in the propagation of life? None. From the point of view of the species, individuals are, if one can put it this way, already dead. An individual is worth nothing alongside the immortal substance hidden deep inside it, which is the only thing to be perpetuated and which authentically and substantially represents such life as there is.[38]*

What would therefore be the role of the individual form the point of view of the propagation of the species? On one hand – Lacan says– none, given that the only thing that matters is the propagation of the species through the germ-plasm. But truly, what is effectively propagated is just another individual, then another individual and another one… and so on. What is therefore *concretely* produced by the germ-plasm is just an individual, but not *as* an individual, but rather *as a type*. Any individual is at this regard already dead, because he does not have any hope of surviving the force of propagation, and his presence cannot but be momentary. From the point of view of the eternal weissmanian substance the individual is a temporary and mortal incarnation of an immortal type, i.e. not of *an* individual but

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[38] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, cit., p. 121.

of *The* individual: "if the concept of species is valid, if natural history exists, it is because there are not only horses, but also *The* Horse."[39] Hence Lacan can intertwine the Freudian speculation around the theory of drives as addressed in *On Narcissism* with the question of the *Gestaltic* captivating dimension of the imaginary of the mirror stage. What does effectively determine the libidic sexual investment necessary for the continuity of the species? Not the particularity of an individual, *but rather universality of the type itself* – to which Lacan adds – "namely an image."[40] Ethologists in fact confirm that a *Gestaltic*-driven form of recognition sets in motion the reproductive behavior[41] and that sexual instinct is fundamentally connected to a relation of images. The conclusion derived by Lacan cannot be more clear: "libidinal drive is centered on the function of the imaginary."[42]

1.4.4. Ego-ideal and Ideal ego

It would be better now to separate two different understanding of the concept of image that were used almost indifferently until now. We are referring here to an argument already developed by Freud himself regarding the term narcissism: what is defined as primary narcissism corresponds to what we called the captivating and unifying principle enabling to operate the illusion of the body-as-One (*Innenwelt*), while secondary narcissism would be that principle which sustains the coherence and consistency of reality itself as a perceptual correlate of the individual (*Umwelt*). Image as formative of the Ego and image as an imaginary supplement in order to give reality the illusion of being-One might obey to the same function in terms of register but should be nevertheless, at least methodologically, separated. The One of the body and the One of reality plays two different role.

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[39] *Ibidem*.
[40] *Idem*, p. 122.
[41] Jacques Lacan, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the* I *Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*, in Id., *Écrits*, cit., p. 77.
[42] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, cit., p. 122.

Freud introduces at this point the concept of *ideality* of the Ego, an operator that would help the structuration of the individual beyond the immediate narcissistic dual self-recognition. Such *ideality* would be then further specified by Lacan (even though the two expression can already be found in the Freudian text itself) with the opposition of the terms Ideal Ego and Ego-Ideal.

We just observed in the discussion regarding the concept of germ-plasm how sexual libido both in human being and animals is activated through an imaginary recognition of the fellow-species as a *Gestaltic* type. Freud supposes that this unmediated form of narcissism would be later on translated from a libidinal introversion to an external investment through the causation of a certain agency: i.e. Ego as an *ideal*. But even more, in this passage it would also be implicated a qualitative change of the *type* of investment. In other words, the aggressivity inevitably contained in any primary narcissism (the "fight for pure prestige" pernicious antagonism doomed to get caught in its own bad infinite circle) would be *elevated* through the Ego: but the Ego not as a fellow antagonistic image of the Same, but rather as an *ideal*.

> *The development of the ego consists in a departure from primary narcissism and gives rise to a vigorous attempt to recover that state. This departure is brought about by means of the displacement of libido on to an ego ideal imposed from without; and satisfaction is brought about from fulfilling this ideal.*[43]

Freud uses the notion of *ideality* in a manner not very far from an interiorization of a repressive agency enacted by the individual's cultural and moral values. "Repression proceeds from the Ego"[44] – he claims – but even more precisely proceeds form the *considerations* the Ego has regarding itself: "We can say that the one man has set up an *ideal* in himself by which he measures his actual ego […]. For the ego the formation of an ideal would be the conditioning factor of

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[43] Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, cit., p. 2953.
[44] *Idem*, p. 2947.

repression."[45] The self-love the real Ego enjoyed in its childhood is now transposed in a new object that retains every value for the individual. But because, according to Freud, no human being is ever capable of giving up a once achieved form of satisfaction, he tries to recover it in a new form: that of an ideality. The Ego is substituted by the *ideal* of itself. The extension of the terms Ideal Ego and Ego-Ideal are specified by Lacan: Ideal Ego represents the primary form of narcissistic investment proper to the unifying and captivating lure of the image of oneself (the *Gestalt* of the type), while the Ego-Ideal represents a secondary investment that appears when civilization and moral values force the individual to renounce to his primary form of satisfaction in order to recover them later in an idealized and mediated form.

The Ego-Ideal operates on the Ideal Ego not only a translation in terms of choice of the object (the idealized version of Ego in the place where the immediate Ego was) but also a form of repression that highlights a qualitative leap toward a different form of libidinal investment (that we will see is none other than the passage from the Imaginary to the symbolic). This conceptual step is developed in extremely careful and precise terms by Freud who is well aware of the difference that separates idealization and sublimation. While idealization is a process according to which an object is maintained and libidically enlarged without modifying its own nature (the place occupied by the object in the libidinal structure of the individual is somehow bigger), sublimation is on the contrary a morphological change of the objectual libido as force, where a qualitative alteration occurs. If we maintain this rather finalistic account of the libidinal investment with a clear-cut separation between the force that invest an object and the object itself (a portrait that we will see will become largely insufficient as soon as we step outside the register of the imaginary), sublimation is about the circuit of the force itself (its energetic quality, its morphological propagation), while idealization is about the nature of the object itself which becomes infinitely larger.

Sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the

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[45] *Ibidem.*

instinct's directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction; in this process the accent falls upon deflection from sexuality. Idealization is a process that concerns the object; by it that object, without any alteration in its nature, is aggrandized and exalted in the subject's mind.[46]

Freud underlines that in sublimation we have an investment which is "deflected from sexuality" and directed toward another aim (socially and "morally" recognized as more elevated). The libido while remaining sexually-designated can deviate its course in order to aim at another object that is not strictly characterized in sexual terms. The Ego-Ideal has the potential to trigger this process of separation between the image as a self-recognition of the Self, understood in purely dualistic terms, with an image that can be diagonalized in order to go beyond the reduction of the dialectic of the mirror stage. The Ego-Ideal is qualitatively still an image of the Self, but it is an image loaded with other elements and it cannot be reduced to the antagonist "fight of pure prestige" between the Same and the Other. We can say that in this conceptual shift from the Ideal Ego of the captivating image of the mirror, to the Ego-Ideal of the moral sublimation, we have a transformation of the One in something heterogeneous from the operation of the unification of the imaginary. Something of the order of the Two is installed in the dialectic of recognition and reflection proper of the imaginary.

It is interesting here to complicate the previous biological reference in order to see what are the differences between the Lacanian doctrine of the imaginary constitution of the Ego in human beings and how it is developed in animals. The conceptual differentiation between Ego-Ideal and Ideal Ego is absent from the animal kingdom. The gap that separates the bodily constitution of the image and its subsequent elevation through the act of libidinal sublimation is absent. Animals according to Lacan inhabit an imaginary which is perfectly constituted, where the gap between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt* disappears. The captivating

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[46] *Idem*, p. 2948.

lure of the *Gestalten* image is not illusionary, it is rather overlapped with the real itself: the subject is found to be completely identical to the image which triggers its sexual behavior. In other words we find a perfect conjunction between objectual libido and narcissistic libido that renders the difference between the two imperceptible: each objectual relation is successfully produced through a narcissistic fixation on an image. Lacan claimed that "in the entire animal world, the entire cycle of sexual behaviour is dominated by the imaginary,"[47] but it is an imaginary where there is no sublimation, no possible elevation between the Ideal Ego and the Ego-Ideal, where the very production of the reflected image of the Self (the *Gestalten* type) is sufficient in order to direct and to exhaustively realize all the possible objectual relations and libidinal encounters. Quite perspicuously Lorenzo Chiesa claimed at this regard that the Ego in the human animal on the contrary is unthinkable without the Ego-Ideal precisely because it "has a vital function for *homo sapiens* only inasmuch as it is linked to the Symbolic."[48] A purely virtual imaginary non mediated by the Symbolic would be instead not only narcissistically self-destructive but also logically strictly impossible. If in a human being the illusionary double of the reflected image creates a gap between the biological immaturity and the image of the body as One is precisely because there is separation between the *Innenwelt* and *the Umwelt* which do not appear in the animal kingdom. The insustainability of the dual logic of the "fight for pure prestige" engaged by a reflected image of the Self stands already as a proof of the fact that an hypothetical pure imaginary cannot exist; its dialectic of alienation is already overdetermined by a primary division. The intertwined relation between Ideal Ego and Ego-Ideal gives the idea of an inner split *in* the register of the imaginary itself, where the *ideality* of the Ego mediate the supposed immediacy of the Ideal Ego. We can therefore postulate two different functional sides of the same concept of image. The latter point emerges in the session of *Seminar I* devoted to Ego-Ideal and Ideal Ego when Serge Leclaire asks whether the displacement of the libido enacted through the Ego-Ideal "is carried out once

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[47] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, cit., p. 138.
[48] Lorenzo Chiesa, "The World of Desire: Lacan Between Evolutionary Biology and Psychoanalytic Theory," in *Filozofski Vestnik*, vol. 30, n. 2, 2009, p. 89.

again on to an image, on to an image of the ego, that is to say on to a form of the ego" or rather whether the term Ego-Ideal should be applied "to something going beyond a form of the ego, to something which is quite properly an ideal, and which comes closer to the idea, to the form."[49] What is at stake in this seemingly technical difference is indeed quite crucial for our discussion: it is the question regarding whether the dimension of the image cannot be brought outside of the narrow boundaries of the imaginary (as an operator of the "being-One" applied to the body, reality etc.) or whether the image is not coextensive with the register of the imaginary, and for example, as it is in the case of the Ego-Ideal, a *visual* element can make a process of libidinal sublimation possible. In other words, is the Ego-Ideal the definitive proof of the fact that what is able to break the close cycle of the imaginary is the outside intervention of the heterogeneity of the symbolic (structure vs. image)? Or do we rather have *an internal principle of differentiation proper to the visual itself* that enable the register of the imaginary to be cut internally by the visual domain itself? The optical schema that Lacan developed in various occasions (in *Seminar I,* in the *Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation* included in the *Écrits* and later in *Seminar X* in 1962-63) along different years during his teaching can serve to clarify the problem, specifying different functions and degrees of operativity of the visual even within the imaginary register itself.

1.4.5 The optical schema

Lacan borrows the physics model of the optical schema from an experiment of Henri Bouasse[50] in order to visualize the position of the subject with regard of the imaginary register. It is an experiment in which some optical properties are used in order to produce, under some specific circumstances, an optical illusion that in Lacan's view has some strong analogies with the main characteristics of the imaginary register. The functioning of the dispositif is quite simple (Figure 1):

[49] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, cit., p. 136.
[50] Henri Bouasse, *Optique et photométrie dites géométriques*, Delagrave, Paris 1934.

in the proximity of the center of a curved mirror, it is put a reverse flower bouquet B hidden in a box S with a vase V standing on the top of the box. From a certain point of view (identified with the cone ßß'γ) it is possible to have the illusion of the (reflected) bouquet appearing exactly around the neck A' of the real vase.
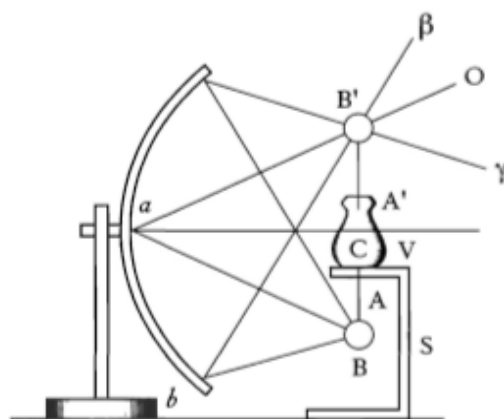
The real image B' of the reversed flower bouquet can appear only when certain conditions of the reflection of the curved mirror are met, the most important one being the eye O positioned inside the cone, otherwise the trick will become visible and the illusion fades away. The curved mirror produces a series of symmetrical points of luminosity which correspond to an object placed at a certain distance from the mirror (which it functions better as much as the points are reflected in the center of the curved mirror, as it is in the case of BaB'). A spherical mirror in this case is able to optically *produce* a real image.

Many elements can be discussed regarding this experiment, but two of them in particular are worth to be underlined. First of all, in a much more effective way than in the example of the mirror stage, we have in the Bouasse experiment a clarification of the *constituent* dimension of the image of the Ego, which does not reflect something that exists independently in a dual relationship but it rather *creates* a real image through its own dispositif. The mirror reflection is still part of the deception according to which it seems that an object is visually reproduced but was nevertheless already existing there in the first place. In other words we can claim that it is still part of the point of view of the misrecognition of itself by the individual (who *believes* in the existence of its own Ego as in the example of the

obsessional neurotic). But we already saw how the captivating illusion of the imaginary only seemingly relies on a dual relationship where the Same and the Other constantly passing into each other and engage in a "fight for pure prestige." There is on the contrary always a *third* that is implied and which starts to become visible in the insufficiency of any dual account of the visual (as it was developed with the libidinal sublimation made possible by the Ego-Ideal). The Bouasse model lead us from a *reflection* proper to the mirror stage to a *refraction* proper to a visuality not foreign to a dimension of *thirdness* (where the image is not *re-*produced but *produced*). The visual starts slowly to separate itself from the strict determination of an ideally pure imaginary and to interiorize elements which we will see are proper of the dialectic of pure differences of the symbolic.

Secondly the visual interaction expressed in the experiment is not reducible to the pernicious dialectic of the immediacy of the relation a-a'. The problem of the cone ßß'γ already brings forward a dimension of mediation that cannot be reduced to a perturbation from outside the imaginary, but that is rather *internal* to the register itself: *it is an internal differentiation of the imaginary*. The internal differentiation is what is at stake in this further level of mediation related to the position of the eye. The imaginary production of a real imagine can be operative only when the eye O finds itself inside the conditions of possibility of the imaginary (in this case the cone ßß'γ), therefore the eye is entirely depended on the occupied position in relation to the real image: too much toward the edge and the image will be seen poorly causing a collapse of the imaginary itself. In order to underline this further level of mediation Lacan developed a second version of the optical schema.
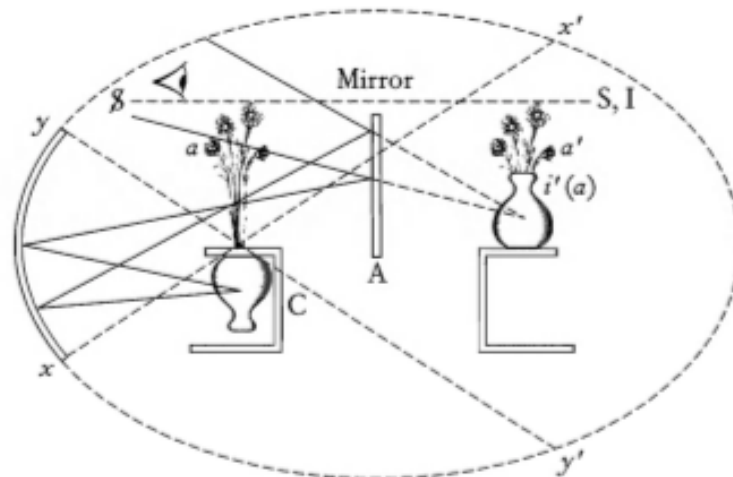
In this second version the dispositif is integrated by a plane mirror positioned behind the real image that introduces an imaginary space of virtual images. The perception of the illusion of the real image of the flower bouquet (that for some reasons here is substituted with the reversed vase) is given in this case only through the mediation of the mirror A. The subject is no more positioned in front of the real image, but rather aside of the curved mirror and he looks toward the plane mirror. Lacan wants to combine the perception of the illusion of the virtual image *i(a)'* (a duplication of the real image *a*) with the perception of the imaginary Ego of the subject (he introduces here the symbol $ which stands for the barred subject of the symbolic; the perception of the imaginary Ego would stand here along the axes $S). In order to include himself in the virtual picture, the subject $ needs to be positioned inside the cone *x'y'* where he will perceive (or mis-recognizes) himself as imaginary Ego along with the appearance of the virtual image of the object *i(a)'*. What should be worth to be underlined in this dispositif is the integration of the reflected image of the Ego (the Ideal Ego as what belongs to the register of the imaginary *Gestalten* recognition of the unifying feature of the body) and the reflected virtual image of the reversed flower bouquet (the consistency of the being-One of reality). The two elements stand side by side mediated by the plane mirror A (which has a homophony with the French *A*utre, indicating the mediation of the symbolic Other). In this model the narcissistic relation of the Ego and the symbolic mediation – enabling the individual to elevate his imaginary in a social sphere beyond the duality of the mirror – are

knotted together indicating a complex intertwining of the registers that would have been extensively analyzed by Lacan in his late teaching of the Seventies. Nevertheless it should be noted that there is no external relation between the register of the imaginary and the register of the symbolic, we rather have an internal split *in* the imaginary itself that indicates a complex figuration of the relation between the two. What the Ego-Ideal shows is the symbolic movement occurring *in* the register of the imaginary itself. Or rather, that the dimension of the visual is on one side laid on the imaginary dialectic of the narcissistic Ego, but on the other hand it is also interpellated by the symbolic sublimation of the *ideality* of the Ego. The latter is none other than the symbolic determination internal to the narcissistic Ego itself. It is as if the gap that makes the dual relationship that the individual entertains with its own fellow image (of the Self/Other) cannot be contained in the logic of the One, and that is therefore transposed on another level where the intervention of the symbolic will play its own part. Far from designating a naïve shift from a register to another, what the problematic of the constitution of the Ego signals – in its coexistence along different registers at the same time – is that the register of the *visual* cannot be reductively limited the imaginary, but it rather cuts diagonally different spheres of the subject constitution. Against a simple opposition between the imaginary as a realm where the image would reign and the symbolic as the dimension of the oppositional cut of the signifier – an idea according to which image and word would stand at opposite and conflictual sides of the field –, it could be rather more productive to cut the Gordian knot that usually merge together image and imaginary and *to understand the three different registers along different operational logics*. We will see at this regard that the imaginary can be understood not so much as the register of the specular image (we just saw that it can be largely inhabited by a *third*) but rather as that of the being-One, while the logic of the signifier will be that of the structural negative differences. At this regard we will devote the following sections to a better understanding and definitions of the Lacanian register of the imaginary and the symbolic: a necessary step in order to better frame the separation between what pertains to the logic of the visual and what pertains to the logic of the imaginary.

Chapter 2

THE CUT OF THE STRUCTURE

In the first chapter we saw how the visual, in the guise of a reflected image of the Self in the mirror, creates the conditions for a constitution of the narcissistic Ego and a unifying illusion of the body-as-One. At the same time we saw how this logic, that Lacan defines as the *imaginary* register, is not comprehensive of everything pertaining to the field of images: a notion of the visual cannot be limited to the register of the imaginary as an operator of the One. We thus separated what belongs to the domain of the visual and what belongs to the Imaginary register. We saw for example that the Ego-Ideal, despite its being included in the domain of the visual, creates an internal gap between an image completely embedded in the captivating logic of the reflected *Gestalten* Self (as in the Ideal Ego) and a *mediated* image that on the contrary is able to sublimate the self-destructive libidinal introversions into social extroversions. In other words, the image from being limited to a representational duplication of the Self, starts to inhabit a different space where we are no more caught in a Hegelian "bad infinity," or a "fight for pure prestige" between the Self and the Other, but where an inter-subjective logic of recognition holds. The image is on one hand lying over the imaginary unifying principle of the Ego but on the other hand also situated in the divisionary cut of the symbolic. In the following chapter we will introduce some of the basic principles of the Lacanian symbolic register in order to account for its irreducibility to the logic of specularity, and at the end, to outline some preliminary remarks regarding the relationship between the visual and the structural.

2.1 When the One comes after the Two

If the logic of the imaginary mirror image can be understood as an operator of the One, for which the fragmented biological immaturity of the *infans*

is projected in the *Gestalten* unity, the "fight for pure prestige" engaged by the individual with the narcissistic image of the Self/Other is inevitably destined to be haunted by the specter of the Two. The problem of the impossibility to resolve the libidinal investment of the Ideal Ego, and the necessary mediation involved by the libidinal sublimation provoked by the Ego-Ideal already shows us that the imaginary will never imply an entirely successful inscription of the One. The One in order to be operative needs to perform a detour. Or in other words, the narcissistic image of the Ego in order to be assumed by the individual needs to be *identified* (which is different than a pure reflection) through a deviation into the symbolic. The entanglement of the two registers is a topical point in the development of Lacan's teaching, considerably complex and multi-faceted, that will be only partially addressed in the present work.

However it is mandatory now to clarify a possible misunderstanding. If we follow *à la lettre* our exposition in the first chapter it would nevertheless seem that the problem of the defective inscription of the One by the imaginary will only be resolved once the problem is displaced from being a matter of *projection* (therefore related to the duality of the narcissistic Ego) to being a matter of *identification* (therefore with the detour of a *third* involved in the process, namely the symbolic); somehow apparently insinuating a temporality where the Imaginary will come first, if compared with the Symbolic; or that the symbolic would constitute a resolution of a problem impossible to be successfully addressed by the Imaginary alone. Someone would even dare to say that if the Imaginary would represent the maternal world of nature, biology, immediacy (it is after all already fully present in the animal kingdom), the Symbolic would stand as the male dimension of culture, language and mediation. Of course it is none of the above. How the logic of the Two and the logic of the One are knotted together is something that should be understood not in temporal terms, but rather in structural and causal terms. At this regards, there is little doubt that at least in the so-called "classicistic years" of Lacan's teaching (that could be claimed go from the *"Discorse of Rome"* – in the *Écrits* the text *The Function and Field of Speech*

and Language in Psychoanalysis[51] from 1953 – to Seminar VII *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*[52] in 1959-1960) there is a primacy, in terms of determination, of the structure of the symbolic. It could be said that the One (of the imaginary) comes only as a response to the Two of the signifier. In another sense, it is the same thing as saying that the relations of synchronic structural causality should be preferred over a temporal succession of different moments. Even though counterintuitive if compared to its commonsensical understanding, unconscious should be understood as deployed over an horizontal series of co-existing elements and not over a succession of a "before" (lost in the early years of the child primary traumatic experiences) and an "after" (the symptomatic return of the repressed).

2.2. From an evolutionary unconscious to a structural unconscious

A theoretical shift of such a kind – that defined the essence of one of the most important Lacanian move – should be rather clarified. It is in fact gravid of many theoretical consequences claiming that the unconscious is not depended on a temporal variable: it goes against many of the most commonsensical understanding of psychic causality and also against many (if not the majority) of psychoanalytic orientations. It could be claimed in fact that there is a theoretical and epistemological bifurcation in the history of psychoanalysis between an evolutionary unconscious and a structuralist unconscious.[53]

According to the former, psychoanalysis is a theory of psychic development where the relation mother-child constitutes an originary matrix of every event that will happen in the following history of an individual. Development is a

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[51] Jacques Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,* in Id., *Écrits*, cit. pp. 197 - 268.
[52] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960* (text established by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Dennis Porter), W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1992.
[53] Massimo Recalcati (with contributions of Luigi Colombo, Domenico Cosenza, Paola Francesconi), *Introduzione alla psicoanalisi contemporanea*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2003, pp. 2-5.

"progressive deployment of an innate potentiality finalistically oriented."[54] What emerges is an explicitly historicist theory of psychic subjectivity where an individual would evolve according to a finalistic development through different phases. The evolutionary model can go in two different directions: one that stresses an intra-psychic determination that defines the core of the psychic individuality as a primary universal meaning-bearer (underlining the innateness of the unconscious); a second that puts the attention on the relation with the surrounding environment (especially the relation mother-child) as what decisively will cause all the subsequent development in terms of psychic life of the human being. Both those directions though share a mystical overestimation of the Origin as what is more "proper" and "defining" in an individual, and – as a consequence – everything that is meant to distantiate the subject from that alleged origin would stand as a mystification and a pathologization. The problem of the subsequent development of the subject is limited to the more or less satisfying mediation between such an Origin and the external environment. The by-products of an approach of that kind are the valorizations of what occurs "before" the fall from the origin, therefore of what is pre-linguistical, pre-symbolic, pre-Oedipical etc. It is an instinctual account of the unconscious; the Ego has the duty to govern it and discipline it according to the principle of reality and the program of civilization. The infamous "phases" in an evolutionary psychoanalytic model represent none other than the different levels of adaptability of the instincts to civilization. It is developed what can be defined as an "archeological" interpretation of Freud, i.e. connected with an idea of a return to the primary *arché*: it is a psychoanalytic treatment aimed at the reconstruction of the lost authenticity of the past through an excavation of memories, traces, signs etc. But it is also a substantialist unconscious provided with an infinite potentiality of conservation of the past; a past which is nevertheless impossible to be accessed by the individual because of an incurable wound that Freud called "repression." The psychoanalyst would be therefore a companion whose role is to guide the analysand into the discovery of his lost archeological past beyond the threshold of the "repression." This subjective truth is not in-becoming, but rather already presupposed and fully

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[54] *Idem*, p. 7.

constituted in another place: the substantialist unconscious. The gap which impedes the individual to access the most truthful part of himself is nevertheless constantly bypassed by the formation of the unconscious (dreams, symptoms, *witz*, slips of the tongue etc.) which constitute the main text through which the psychoanalyst deciphers the hidden truth of the analysand. To take off the veil of the repression means to recuperate one's own lost archeological past in order to access the hidden truth of oneself. The role of a psychoanalyst according to this model is still entirely medical, in the sense that an expert-subject of a certain discipline approaches the patient-object in order to make a more or less acceptable form of recovery possible (i.e. to heal the wound of repression). The analytic act would be at this regard entirely based on *interpretation*: i.e. directed from the outside to the inside. The analysand is not able to see the entirety of his own subjectivity, because of its concealment by repression processes. But the situation is completely different for the analyst. The latter is in fact able – as a depositary of a disciplinary medical knowledge – to see through the accessible conscious Ego the hidden dimension of the unconscious lost past.

The anthropology which emerges from evolutionary psychoanalysis is rather dualistic: all the contrasts within the individual are created by the incapacity to mediate between two opposing and conflicting principles: the impulses of the unconscious and the program of civilization. The Ego becomes a disciplining instance and psychoanalysis is reduced to an adaptational pragmatic according to which the subject should assume/untangle/traverse his formations of the unconscious derived from the disagreement between the principle of reality and the repressed authentic core of one's own unconscious; at the same time he should be well aware that those formations of the unconscious are an unstable forced compromises, inevitably renunciatives, but nevertheless necessary in order to contain the unconscious forces.

Against an evolutionary unconscious mainly deployed through temporal variables, the renovation of psychoanalysis carried out by Jacques Lacan is on the opposite centered around the synchronic causation of language and structure. If for the evolutionary paradigm everything was already written in the pre-history of the

individual (in infantile phases, in the pre-genital libidinal fixation), a structuralist account of the unconscious is not limited to the reconstruction of the memory of the past, but it is rather aimed at the *production of a truth*. The analytic work, freed from a temporal epistemology, passes from being a *reconstruction* of something that is already there in the hidden deep past of the individual to a *construction* of something new addressed to the future. There is a disjunction between a *reality* of one's own past and a *subjective truth* which is irreducible to the former: a truth which does not pre-exist the analytic work but is rather co-extensive with it.

> *The reason for the ambiguity of hysterical revelation of the past is not so much the vacillation of its content between the imaginary and reality [réel] for it is situated in both. Nor is it the fact that it is made up of lies. It is that it presents us with the birth of truth in speech, and thereby brings us up against the reality of what is neither true nor false. At least, that is the most disturbing aspect of the problem.[55]*

Lacan inaugurates a psychoanalytic tradition according to which it is possible to have a psychic emancipation from a certain determinism of the conditions of one's own past through a practice of speech, i.e. a certain assumption of subjective responsibility that is irreducible to what are the past conditions of this very act. As it was claimed by Lacan himself in one of his famous aphorism, at the end "one is always responsible for one's position as a subject."[56]

One of the most famous moment in Freud's work where the Viennese doctor distances himself the most from any possible account of temporal causal determination in psychic life can be found in the famous clinical case of the "Wolf Man." In this extraordinary clinical case what we can call the "historical substance" of the primary scene is constantly put into question. In the description of one of the many moments in the treatment of Sergej Pankeev, Freud reports that, when the patient was a child, at only one year and a half of age, he would

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[55] Jacques Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,* in Id., *Écrits*, cit. p. 212.
[56] Jacques Lacan, *Science and Truth,* in Id., *Écrits*, cit. p. 729.

have allegedly witnessed a traumatic event: a scene of copulation *a tergo more ferarum* between his mother and his father. This fact alone would have triggered one of the most famous case of infantile neurosis in the history of psychoanalysis. A long series of details reconstructed through Pankeev's adult symptoms and unconscious formations is deduced by Freud: for example the whiteness of the wolves that Pankeev sees in a dream would be connected with the whiteness of his mother's underclothes supposedly seen in that traumatic first scene. The determination of the traumatic scene do not always goes from the past to the present, sometime the causality is reversed and it can even goes from the present to an afterwards rearticulation of what happened in the past. The primacy of the temporal determination, according to which the past would determine the future, is subverted by a *structural causality* according to which the virtual possibilities opened by a past event can be actualized in a variety of different ways, and a certain present actualization would be able to re-articulate *après-coup* the very possibilities opened up by the previous event. We can thus say that the determining potentialities of a past event are never fully exhausted by itself, but are rather further supplemented by its future consequences. In order to frame the Freudian *Urszene* we should thus abandon the lexicon of occurrences (as if an event would exhaust its potentiality in certain limited time frame) and adopt a different terminology like determinancy, causality etc. according to which the primary scene is not understood as a determinant cause but rather as a variable.

Freud therefore starts to reflect on the *reality* of this primordial scene, and begins to re-consider its undisputable occurrence: "perhaps what the child observed was not copulation between his parents but copulation between animals, which he then displaced on to his parents, as though he had inferred that his parents did things in the same way."[57] The patient believes he remembers something as historically happened, but many times he supplements this very memory with a subjective deformation.

Freud demands a total objectification of proof when it comes to dating the

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[57] Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (1918 [1914])*, in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, cit., p. 3543.

primal scene, but he simply presupposes all the resubjectivizations of the event that seem necessary to him to explain its effects at each turning point at which the subject restructures himself—that is, as many restructurings of the event as take place, as he puts it, nachtraglich*, after the fact. [...] He annuls* the times for understanding *in favor of* the moments of concluding *which precipitate the subject's meditation toward deciding the meaning to be attached to the early event.*[58]

It is essential on the other hand to not assimilate the *Urszene* with a purely fantasized scene, but rather as a primary traumatic event – that precisely because of its being traumatic – calls for a subsequent symbolization in order to be integrated in the individual psychic economy. The occurrence of the scene is never fully accomplished in its own objectivity but rather always already supplemented by a subjective mediation: it is therefore impossible to separate what was objectively pertaining to the level of reality and what was subsequently deviated by the subjective perspective of the child. The problem of what Lacan will define as the register of the Real is precisely the impossibility of separating with a strict boundary these two levels: the reality of the event and the subjective apprehension of it. Freud himself claims regarding the clinical case of the *Wolf Man*: "I should myself be glad to know whether the primal scene in my present patient's case was a phantasy or a real experience; but, taking other similar cases into account, I must admit that the answer to this question is not in fact a matter of very great importance."[59] The problem is that the event itself – for example in this case the fact of having witnessed one's parents in a moment of sexual copulation – is open to a different range of possible actualizations that will be realized only from the point of view of the future consequences of it: consequences where the subject will be an integral part of them. This is the main reason that differentiates a synchronic and structural approach from an evolutionary one. While in the evolutionary model the archeological past is always already constituted in the

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[58] Jacques Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,* in Id., *Écrits*, cit. p. 213.
[59] Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (1918 [1914]),* in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, cit., p. 3577.

history of an individual (it is already there, maybe concealed a bit by repression processes, but nevertheless ontologically constituted), the Freudian *Urszene* will be known (but we can even say that it "will have occurred") only afterwards, from the point of view of the realization of the consequences. Whether the scene will be traumatic or not, it will be known only from the point of view of the future. This reverse temporality – according to which the realization of a certain gesture will be always known after the actualization of its future consequences – marks the pivotal feature of a structural account of the unconscious.

It should be now clear how the latter understanding of the unconscious is radically incompatible with any idea of Origin that would allegedly stand as a sparking defining moment subsequently concretized in the development of the subject. The only true form of determination for structural psychoanalysis is the one given by the synchronic spectrum of symbolic determinants that *subject the subject* in its dimension of speech. It is only through the fact that it is a speaking being that a human being is open to the further actualization of what happened in his own past. The signifiers that appears in a traumatic event (and in this sense every event is minimally always traumatic in the sense that it is always depended on a certain differed form of afterwards actualization) will always be open to a possible rearticulation from future. Here lies the main paradox of a structural temporality: what truly happened in the past will be known only from its consequential realization in the future. But for Lacan this form of retrospective causation is not limited to an epistemological level (something happens objectively in the real and its subjective signification will only arrive *après-coup*), it is rather ontological (*the* Urszene *itself will have happened only afterwards*). We can therefore make a step further and conclude that the retrospective causation is not related to plane of knowledge, but pertains to the level of Being. The supposition of Lacan is that if a subject of the unconscious is possible, this must be not searched for in the past, but rather *in the future*: in the missing link that prevents a certain event to fully accomplish its causation; the same missing link that opens up an event to a possible innovative and unforeseeable outcome.

The logic of the afterward realization can nevertheless still be haunted by some

problems. It is in fact a *realization*. Even though not happening in the moment of the temporal occurrence of the event in the past, it is postponed in future, but still somehow contemplated as possible (or sometimes even still operative as a regulative idea). It may seem that we did not completely abandon a logic of the One (where the consistency of the realized signification is nevertheless present, even if phantasmatically). The logic of the Two on the contrary is a logic of the eternal ambiguity of sense, where a definitive actualization is not postponed, but rather *integrated as absent*. It is in order to address the latter principle that Lacan develop the structural logic of the signifier.

In conclusion regarding the relationship between the logic of the One and the logic of the Two, we can say that the emergence of the specular projection of the image of the One in the form of the imaginary captivation cannot but comes *after* the appearance of the Two. The uncertainty of the inscription of the One – the fact that the One cannot be realized in the form of an Ideal Ego, but it needs a detour through the sublimatory possibility opened by the Ego-Ideal in order to become operative – already presupposed that the One tries to react to the previous trauma of the appearance of the Two in order to suture its gap. We will develop in the following sections how behind the illusionary appearance of the imaginary, lies the scandal of the gap of the symbolic, and how a theory of the visual – far from relying on an isolated description of the Imaginary – cannot but takes into account the entanglement between the Two of the symbolic and the One of the imaginary.

2.3. The One of meaning, the Two of the signifier

If what Freud discovered, and rediscovers ever more abruptly, has a meaning, it is that the signifier's displacement determines subjects' acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate, regardless of their innate gifts and instruction, and irregardless of their character or sex; and that everything pertaining to the psychological pregiven follows willy-nilly the

signifier's train, like weapons and baggage.[60]

It is rather difficult to find such a clear and straightforward statement in the entire spectrum of Lacan's teaching. At this regards there are very few doubts: the subject (a term that should never be confused with the psychological individual and that we will introduce only after having joined it together with the register of the symbolic) is determined in every way by the movement and displacement of the signifier. Another statement of that kind is: "the unconscious is structured like a language," one of the most renowned maxim by Lacan in which it is pompously stated the pivotal place of language in psychoanalysis. But what exactly does it mean that a subject is determined in his "acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate" by the signifier "regardless of his innate gifts"? Many explanations can be brought forward in order to develop this point. Before stepping more decisively in the field of linguistic and addressing the knot that links together psychoanalysis and structuralism, we should rather take some more elementary and phenomenological examples that can fruitfully explain what is at stake with the entanglement of psychoanalysis and linguistic.

It was Freud himself who discovered in his clinical cases that the combinatory connection of signifiers determines the formations of the unconscious. In a famous example, in the exposition of the clinical case of the "Rat Man,"[61] Freud reports that his patient is suddenly taken by an urgent impulse to become slimmer because he believes he has become too fat (in German "dick"). During every meal he gets up from the table before the dessert and he goes to walk over a mountain in order to exhaust himself; he arrives at the point where this gym habit becomes even a bit dangerous when one day he comes back home with dripping perspiration after having done more than what he was able to. The patient cannot think of any explanation for his obsessional behavior until he recalls that an English cousin once started to become very attentive to his wife making him jealous about it. The cousin's name was Richard, and according to the usual practice in English was known as *Dick*. Willing to kill his rival (*Dick*), he started

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[60] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar on "The Purloined Letter,"* in Id., *Écrits*, cit. p. 21.
[61] Sigmund Freud, *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (1909)*, in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, cit., p. 2148.

to kill his being too-fat (*Dick*). The unconscious superimposition of these two sounds guides his behavior which is driven by the pure, arbitrary and random coincidence of a recurring word (*Dick*). His being too fat should not be understood in imaginary terms as connected to the acceptance of the image of himself, his self-esteem and so forth. It should rather be understood as depended on the pure repetition of a signifier which accidentally appeared in the German language (in another language it could not have happened in the same way). This seemingly marginal element symbolically ends up hetero-directing an unconscious association that organizes the way through which the "Rat Man" sees and perceives himself in the Imaginary.

What this anecdote shows is that there is a hidden structure of resonances and echoes between signifiers that lies exclusively behind the plan of signification and meaning, and which is completely depended on the structure a certain system (in this case, the German language). There is no meaning connection that links the fact of perceiving himself as too-fat with his willingness of getting rid of his rival Richard. The overlap between the two planes is made possible *only* by the arbitrary superimposition of two sounds images which repeat themselves.

When a series of signifiers is produced there is always more than a pure plane of signification. The signifiers – given their arbitrariness and the fact that they do not have an intrinsic connection with the concepts they aim to indicate – are always destined to say *more* than what the speaker intended to say. There is a split between the event of signification carried by the signifiers and the fact that the individual wanted to say something more/different/less than what actually was expressed. When an anorexic patient, as reported in a clinical case, recounts during a session that her "mother never digested [her],"[62] it is clear that what she was willing to express with these words was hijacked by the signifiers themselves which expanded the plane of signification beyond her (or better said, the Ego's) control and indicated an Other plan unrecognized (or only unconsciously known) by the subject.

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[62] Massimo Recalcati, Uberto Zuccardi Merli, *Anoressia, Bulimia, Obesità*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2006.

However, these examples are likely to be almost excessively clear, because they already explicit what this Other plan of signification would aim at. Two levels of signification, even though separated from each other (yet acoustically connected by the signifiers resonances), both successfully express a consistent meaning (one for the individual whose intentions he was conscious of, and one for the subject of the unconscious that insisted under the surface) and end up being formally too much looking alike. *Yet the unconscious meaning is not another plane of signification qualitatively identical with the conscious one*. It rather implies a certain *resistance to meaning* and hence obeys to a different and rather puzzling logic. At this regard it is interesting to underline that a minimal "unconscious effect" is not only produced in an analytic session when an interpretation of an analyst is brought forward, but it is rather inevitably implicated in any series of signifiers.

When someone speaks, a series of signifiers are uttered. The meaning that these signifiers express is never perfectly clear even to the speaker itself who will recognize what those words would have meant *only* when they will already be expressed. It is rather idealistic to claim that a process of signification would be already clear in an alleged intention (or concepts) in the mind of the speaker *before* the occurrence of an utterance. If it were so, language could be correctly reduced to be a neutral instrument aimed at expressing ideas independently created in every human being's mind.

Another example could be taken from the experience of writing: everyone when writing from time to time needs to stop by for a moment and re-reads what has just been written on the page. The meaning of a sequence of sentences is in a way always minimally uncertain even to the writer himself, who needs to verify at every step whether what he just wrote was actually consistent with what he had intended to write. The very production of a series of signifiers (written or spoken) is always destined to be caught in a quandary: a doubt is implicated regarding the very intention of what the speaker would have wanted to express with them. Even to the speaker himself this very intention (that will also reveal something about himself) would become clear only afterwards when the speech act already took

place and cannot be undone. We can see in this phenomenon of internal split *within* a series of signifiers a first definition of what in psychoanalysis is designated with the notion of "desire." The signifiers expressed in a certain sequence are always taken from the Other (the ideal *locus* where all the signifiers exist independently from any subjective choice), therefore the speaker does not recognize himself in them. When a certain series is produced, those signifiers creates a gap in the speaker himself, given that the very question regarding the intention which lies behind them can only appear afterwards when the speech act already took place, and the individual confronts himself with a question regarding his own intention. It is in this precise moment that a subject of desire emerges: the moment when an inquiry regarding the possible signification of this series of words is opened up and made possible.

When someone confronts his own signifiers he asks himself: "What did I mean to say with these?" "What was my intention in saying these words?" Which is also another way of saying "what the Other wants from me?" (given that the place where the signifiers are taken from is the Other, and the very meaning of those signifiers – being structurally enigmatic – is not transparently implicated but rather consequential the occurrence of their utterance). *Desire in psychoanalysis cannot but be articulated linguistically because it is the series of signifiers that (out)places the domain and the control of the individual (i.e. the Ego) when confronted with them*. The relation with language is thus eminently dis-appropriating, given that the emergence of an enigmatic desire is consubstantial with the appearance of the opacity of signifiers.

Psychoanalysis places itself in the space of the enigma of the signifiers and in doing so it triggers the question regarding one's own desire. But also the opposite move (i.e. one of the most extraordinary operation in order to fill this gap and repress this very opacity) occurs, when the Imaginary, in the everyday experience of language, is able to "make One" out of the ambiguity of the Two of the signifiers.

When someone expresses a series of words, these same words would resonate ambiguously to him; because, as we saw, it is the very disconnection between

signifiers and meaning that triggers the interrogation regarding one's own desire (or regarding the intention underlying this very speech act, which is the same thing). The Imaginary would act at this regard as a filler in the gap opened by the bifurcation between the expressed words and the question regarding them. To the question "what did I mean to say with those words?" the imaginary would try to answer "this is exactly what you were meaning to say with those words." In other words the Imaginary tries to mitigate the scandal of the opacity of language with the answer of communication; it constructs the illusion that retrospectively the meaning produced by this series of words was actually already there in the intention of the individual before the speech act took place. But what is the instrument that makes this very process or reassurance possible? None other than the inter-subjective recognition.

2.4. Imaginary and inter-subjectivity

The operator of the One of the Imaginary in the field of speech works in the following way: a series of signifiers is uttered and directed toward an other (not the Other as a *locus* where the signifiers are taken, but the inter-subjective other, i.e. the "other person"); and the latter *signals* that the transition of concepts or ideas from an individual to another successfully took place. As we can experience in any everyday direct observation of a speech act, it is mandatory that this *signs* are rendered *visible*. When we talk to someone, this other person has to make visible that what we are saying with our words is actually understandable and does make sense. It can be rendered visible through certain gestures of approval (nodding, smiling etc.) or through a verbal confirmation ("yes, you're right!," "definitely,"), but it is mandatory that this act of recognition is somehow performed. The series of signifiers that seem ambiguous to the speaker itself must be confirmed, *and what is crucial to underline is the fact that they have to be confirmed first and foremost to the benefit not of the successful communication but of the speaker itself*. The recognition guaranteed by the imaginary other (the "other person" of the speech act) functions primarily to close the gap that was previously opened by the enigmatic appearance of the series of signifiers for the

speaker. The individual who performs a linguistic utterance is dis-appropriated by the series of signifiers of any forms of spontaneous and intrinsic meaning production, and – we saw it in the previous section – he is also dis-appropriated of any transparent understanding of his own intentions – the very same intensions that would allegedly inhabit the speech act even before the utterance took place –.
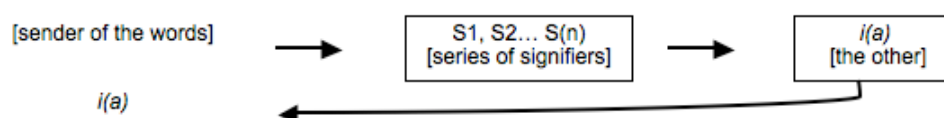
[Image 1]

The role of the "other person," much more than sealing the successful communication between the sender of the message and the addressee, functions as a producer of the genuineness of the intentions at the benefit of the performer of the speech act. It *creates* the illusion that the intentions of the sender of the speech act were genuine and were there from the very beginning. "Yes, what you are saying is exactly what you meant"; "it is perfectly clear that the series of signifiers that you just enunciated were actually aiming at transferring those concepts from you to me," "those words that you just enunciated and the ones that I just heard are actually indicating the very same concepts" and so on. This recognition given by the "other person" therefore functions as a way to close the gap opened by the Two of the signifiers and to inscribe the substantial One of meaning. The enigmatic desire that epitomizes the relation between the opaqueness of the series of signifiers and the subject of the question emerging from them, is repressed by the circle of recognition. What we have here is a duality between the subject of unconscious (consubstantial with the question emerged from the opacity of the signifiers) and the individual of the Imaginary who believes that the meaning produced by the speech act was already there in his mind even before the speech act took place. What is interesting to note is that the internal relationship between

the individual and the content /meaning of his speech act is produced only (and it could not be otherwise) through the intervention of the confirmation of the "other person" involved. *The imaginary individual is not there at the beginning, it is rather produced*; it is there only after the "nodding" of the addressee have stuck together the intentions artificially produced in the theater of communication and the source of the series of signifiers. In order to be identified with the meaning of his words, the individual of the Imaginary needs to lean on the reassurance of the addressee of his speech act. The paradox is that what we see in Image 1 as occupying the position of the sender of the speech act (on the left) is there only retrospectively after the seal of the addressee has been completed. The movement goes retrospectively from the addressee to the sender, producing *après-coup* the illusion of an intention that would have allegedly always been there in the position of the sender.

We can now derive two very important consequences from this reflection on the speech act. First of all it should be clear now how the production of the individual of the Imaginary through the repression of the ambiguity of language is *homological* with the constitution of the unifying feature of the body through the externality of the reflected image. The very same illusion of retrospectively creating a One (there of the body, here of the intentions of the enunciation) where on the contrary the One is only the result of the process, is operative in the very same way in the field of visuality *and* in the field of speech. The imaginary is able to produce an inversion according to which the One is *believed* to be existed from the very beginning, and is not produced by its own machinery as it actually occurs. *The imaginary is therefore at the same time a production of the One, and the self-effacing dissimulation of this very gesture.*

Secondly, once again we saw how the Imaginary is operative as an inscription of the One both in the field of speech *and* in the field of vision. We can therefore confirm one of the thesis of the present work: the domain of vision and the domain of the Imaginary should not be conflated, and should be analyzed separately. The visual is not exhaustively expressed by the Imaginary register, and at the same time (and conversely) the Imaginary is not only operative in the field

of vision.

Thirdly, the realization of the One comes *after* the gap created by the Two. The One is not primary, it is rather produced through certain devices as we saw with the internalization of the reflected image or here with the mutual recognition between sender and addressee in the speech act. It is not difficult to hear a resonance of one of Alain Badiou's main ontological thesis: the One is not, it is rather an effect created by an act of counting. In this case the act of counting is materially produced in the inscription of the regime of the Imaginary. A regime that, as we saw, creates as a consequence a repression of the enigmatic and conflictual dimension of the Two of the signifiers and dwells in the illusion of the primacy and substantiality of the individual Ego. The subject of desire on the contrary is – according to Lacan – only the interstitial space between a signifier and itself: the emerging interval in the ambiguity of the series of signifiers. We will see that the consequences of this notion of desire will be theoretically quite relevant even though not deprived of some problems. But what is nevertheless important to underline is the fact that in the understanding of the subject of desire as an articulation of a series of signifiers Lacan is reaffirming once again the primacy of a structural, synchronic and horizontal causality against an evolutionary and temporal one. In this sense the regime of the One could be also understood (in its retrospective inscription of a substantial primary entity) as a last reaction against the synchronicity of the structure and an ultimate attempt to introduce a temporal/evolutionary model. We will see now that it is precisely because of that that in the practice of psychoanalysis the dimension of the imaginary will be radically excluded from its domain.

2.5. The Imaginary on the couch

Why in a psychoanalytic session the analysand when talking and producing the infamous free associations is not sitting on a chair but he is rather lying on a couch? Why shouldn't he looking the analyst face-to-face? Why is the analyst sitting behind his back not letting him have any idea from his facial expressions

about what he is thinking? The rule of the couch may sound eccentric, to someone even an almost esoteric legacy of older times closer to a die-hard traditional habit than to a real scientific requirement. After all aren't we living in the times where cognitive-behaviorist therapies perform a much more scientifically credible and effective treatment of symptoms? Doesn't in the times of medications and widespread psychological treatments the very idea of talking from a couch in order to cure a bodily symptom like anorexia or depression sound a bit like an aristocratic snobbish exotism? Or even worse a suggestive and pre-scientific mysticism?

The couch embodies one of the very few rigid rules enforced in a psychoanalytic technique in a field where – especially in a Lacanian orientation – almost nothing is regulated or planned in advance. The devaluation of the face-to-face relationship between analysand and analyst relies precisely on the pivotal role that language embodies in the formations of the unconscious. Given that in a speech act the other person is not only an addressee of an abstract communication of a content (as if language could be a purely neutral carrier of an externally related object) but is first and foremost an instance that joins together an Ego (sender of the message) with the alleged signified of the signifiers he uttered, the very form of this verbal exchange must be radically put into question. According to a structuralist account of psychoanalysis the subject of the unconscious is not something that exists in the depth of a human being's soul – as if it were something that could exist independently from any interrogation regarding itself – it is rather *created* by a psychoanalytic act. It is nothing more than a supposition, quite far from a substantial entity that could be dissected and analyzed by a specific discipline (i.e. psychoanalysis) according to the model of empirical sciences. *The subject of the unconscious is co-extensive with the interrogation regarding its status*. It should be clear now how the very repression of the ambiguity of the signifiers, in their eclipse of the dimension of desire which is embedded in their opaqueness, cannot but be the fiercest enemy of the emergence of the unconscious. While the imaginary would act as a filler of the gap opened by the cut of the signifier, psychoanalysis will try on the contrary to leave this gap open and to let it resonate in the enigmatic words of the analysand.

An analytic setting is created when the sender of a certain series of signifiers –
when confronted with the question "what did I mean to say with those words?" –
does not find as a ready-made answer by the addressee: "this is exactly what you
were meaning to say with those words." He rather finds something else: silence.
"What was my intention in saying these words?": and the other replies with
silence. If in the imaginary there is a substitution of a question with an answer –
we can say: a substitution of a question mark "?" with an exclamation mark "!" –
in an analytic session the question is sent back to whom previously asks it. The
question will be repeated. The signifiers will remain the same but instead of
inverting the punctuation ("!" in the place of "?") they will make the same
inverted route (from the addressee to the sender). "What was my intention in
saying these words?" is replied with "what was your intention in saying these
words?" and so on. That is why methodologically the position of an analyst
should be radically silent. Obviously this is not a clinical rule that should be
followed *à la lettre*, there are cases in which a methodological silence can be also
enacted through some verbal intervention, but in terms of the relations between
the analysand and the signifiers produced in a session, the space of the ambiguity
from which a possible question regarding one's own desire can emerge, should be
preserved at any cost.
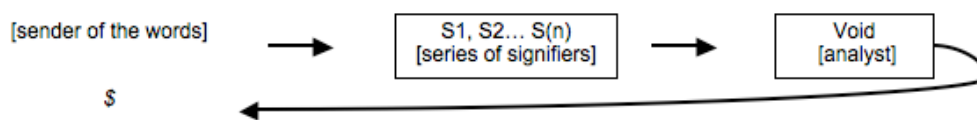
[Image 2]

This insight also shows how a structuralist account of the unconscious goes
always interpretation. The analyst should never be the one who reveals to the
analysand how the signifiers he produced in a session would allegedly express the
repressed content of his own unconscious material. The latter would be an

archeological and substantial notion of the unconscious quite foreign to the perspective developed by Lacan, and also haunted by a dualist specter that would oppose the superficial and the profound, the form and the content, the signifier and the signified and so on. Even more, the interpretation by an analyst would inevitably make the space of analysis to fall back in an imaginarized space, where the analyst would constitute an reassuring addressee of a series of signifiers and where the ambiguity of their status would be repressed by their reduction to a certain substantial meaning. Lacan with the notion of the unconscious as structured like a language points also in the direction of a position of the analyst as an instance that always objects to the spontaneous reduction of the ambiguity of language to the plane of the One. In this sense an analysand should never be in the position of being able to re-appropriate the signifiers he himself uttered. While the addressee will constitute a guarantee of the fact that those signifiers were actually belonging to him, an analyst on the contrary should become the guarantor of the opposite: that those words would always sound as foreigner to the analysand, as if they were coming from an Other. The model is not the hermeneutic philosopher or the empiricist scientist, but rather the Brechtian theater of the distancing-effect (*Verfremdungseffekt)*. The triggered question should be: "whose those words are?", "where are they coming from?" The analytic work should emerge from the void left by the addressee (and its logic of the imaginary One) and preserved by analyst. Only in this place the appearance of the subject of the unconscious is possible: in the interstitial space (the Two) between different signifiers.

We have oscillated until now between the notion of the Ego (or individual, or even person) and the notion of subject, but it should be clear now what is the difference that separates these two concepts. The problem is never the status of the human being that occupies the place of the senders of a certain series of signifiers. From a structural point of view there is never a pre-given reality of a human being that is not already caught in the circle of structure and in language. But even more we tried in the last two sections also to criticize the idea that the "symbolic path" of a speech act would go from the sender to the addressee. There is at this regard an heterogeneity between a diachronic succession and a structural

causality that in order to be addressed require the use of a future perfect tense: the tense, par excellence, that highlights the working modality of a structural causality. If, the sender of the message, *will have been* (in the past) a subject or an individual *will be known* only from the point of view of the Imaginary seal: if the addressee will have confirmed the production of a certain meaning from those signifier, an individual (or Ego) will appear. If, on the contrary, the addressee will have left the ambiguity of the series of signifiers to resonate in the space of the sender, there will be a subject: a subject able to traverse the contingency of the meaning production and the disconnection between signifiers and what they would stand for. In inhabiting this uncertain space, he will be able to become a *subject*.

2.6. The Saussurian difference

2.6.1. The arbitrariness of signifiers

If the subject of the unconscious from the point of view of the structure is none other than the interstitial space between a series of signifiers (the minimal chain is composed by two signifiers, i.e. the pair S1-S2) we should now address what is the character of this articulation of unconscious formations and language, and what is the role played by the science of linguistic. The concept of signifier, that Lacan borrows from linguistic but whose understanding will end up being conceptually broader, will constitute the core of the aforementioned logic of the Two which epitomizes the register of the symbolic.

Lacan's main point of reference for the concept of signifier is obviously Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistic*.[63] The history of this masterpiece is well-known: appeared for the first time in 1916 it was based on the lectures given by Saussure in Geneva during the years between 1906 and 1911 and edited by his pupils Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Despite the several

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[63] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger, translated by Wade Baskin), Philosophical Library Inc., New York 1959.

philological problems (only partially clarified with the critical edition of 1968), this work will exercise a profound influence in Europe especially between the Forties and the Sixties and especially in what will be subsequently called *structuralism*. But what allow Saussure to develop this logic of the Two, so relevant for psychoanalysis, from the study of language?

In the first chapter of the *Course* Saussure introduced many of his most important concepts: sign, signifier, signified. He also developed a critique regarding the existence of concepts independently from language and signifiers. But one of his most important critique is the one against the notion of language as a nomenclature, i.e. the idea of giving names to an external and autonomous world made by ideas and conceptual entities. Nevertheless it is the very naïveté of this theory that would open up the space for its overthrowing:

> *This conception is open to criticism at several points. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words; it does not tell us whether a name is vocal or psychological in nature (*arbor*, for instance can be considered from either viewpoint); finally, it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation – an assumption that is anything but true. But this rather naïve approach can bring us near the truth by showing us that linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms.*[64]

What is in fact the relationship between a series of sounds and a conceptual entity? Between a real-existing being, its concept and its linguistic correlated term? On one side the theory of language as a nomenclature hypostatizes the independent existence of concepts outside of their relation with a linguistic entity, on the other side it is this very same account that enable us to conceptually separate the series of things from the series of words. In the moment of the recognition of their separation (their intrinsic non-relatedness), the problem of their connection does emerge. Saussure defines – with an effective paradoxical formulation – the linguistic *unit* as a *two*-side entity.

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[64] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, cit., p. 65.

The Saussurian definition of the linguistic sign as divided, separated, different from itself *and at the same time* as a coordinated unity of concept and acoustic image, is only apparently contradictory. The problem of the connection between the series of concepts and the series of words presupposes already the assumption of the de-naturalization of language, and its impossibility of being reduced to a necessitated correlate of real-existing beings. In fact it is in order to distance himself from a naïve notion of external referentiality that Saussure substitutes the terms "concept" and "acoustic image" with "signified" and "signifier." *The dialectical knot of duplicity and unity of the sign is thus re-inscribed through the terms signifier and signified within language itself in order to prescind from the problem of the external reference*.

In the second section of the first chapter Saussure introduces the notion of "arbitrary nature of the sign" as the first principle of linguistic: a concept that seems to confirm even more strongly the bifurcation between the plane of signifiers from the plane of signified. Arbitrariness is an unmotivated connection between a signifier and a signified. For example there are no rational reasons that leads a certain language to use the sequence of sounds /bread/ and another language the sequence of sounds /pane/ in order to identify the very same concept of "food made of flour, water, and yeast mixed together and baked." The same concept could be expressed (and in fact in other languages *is* expressed) in several other ways while maintaining the same successful referential result. The signifier /pane/ belong to the system of signs "Italian language," while /bread/ belongs to the system of signs "English language": Italian and English are two different system of signs that can associate different combinations of sounds on different concept or idea without having to rely on any intrinsic reason in order to perform *that* kind of connection and not some other. Every language is hence a system of signs based on the principle of *arbitrariness*. Even the onomatopoeic words, that seem to contradict this rule, in fact largely relies on a certain degree of arbitrariness, as it is clear in the example of the term designating the cock-crow: in Italian /chicchiricchì/, in French /cocorico/, in German /kikeriki/, in English /cock-a-doo-dle-doo/ and so on. Arbitrariness should not be confused with free choice of the speaker:

[Arbitrary] should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker (we shall see below that the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community); I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified.[65]

Arbitrariness should also not be understood as a shared and free convention freely adopted by a certain language community, but rather as a *scission that renders language eccentric and out-of-joint. Language does not have any "natural connection" with realm of concepts, its status is "unmotivated," un-understandable; its connection with the conceptual correlate absolutely contingent.* But even more importantly the artificiality of language is incompatible with the idea that the series of signifiers and the series of signified would pre-exist their encounter, independently and separated from each other. Here lies on of the most remarkable Saussurian insight: the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign should be thought together with the *arbitrary nature of the system as a whole*. The problem of the verticality of the relation signifier/signified, which inevitably tends to underline the dimension of *unity* of the linguistic sign, should be replaced with an horizontal understanding of the relation between signifiers which is more apt to address the dimension of *separation* and *alienation* proper to the logic of the Two.

2.6.2. "A shapeless and indistinct mass"

In the section on the "Linguistic Value" of the *Course* the problem of the connection between the two series is re-inscribed in the problem of the *definition* of the two series themselves. The external limit that separate them become the internal limit that defines each of them. The problem of the connection between a concept and an acoustic image goes back to the question of the definition of the single elements involved: is there such a thing as a concept and an acoustic image if we take them alone and separated from each other? A vertical approach that tries to connect the single concept with the singular acoustic image, should be

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[65] *Idem*, pp. 68-69.

replaced with a horizontal approach that tries to address the constitution of the single series taken alone.

> *Psychologically our thought – apart from its expression in words – is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas.*

Acoustic image is in fact quite a slippery object if seen from its physical features: audiometric researches, already in the XIX Century demonstrated that every person pronounces every word in an absolutely singular and different way (not only when pronouncing different words, but also when pronouncing the same words in different circumstances): the physic-material bases of recognition of a word seem thus to be quite uncertain and far from necessitated. For example the very delimitation of the single words within a sentence or a group of sentences should not be taken for granted from a purely physical-material point of view. For example when confronted with an unknown foreign language, it is not only the meaning of the sentences that seems obscure, but also the delimitation of the single words (where one word ends, and when the next one begins). To our ears a foreign language seems a shapeless and indistinct mass of sounds. In the same manner our thoughts before the delimiting cut of signifiers seem an amorphous mass.
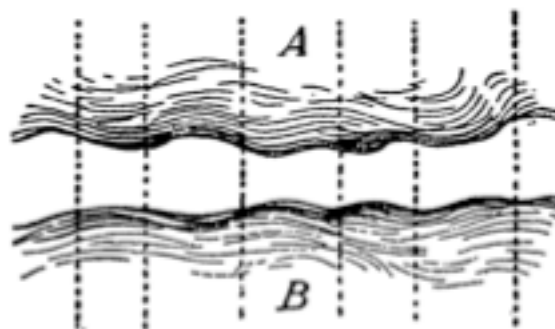
[Image 3]

As it is portrayed in Image 3 a language is – in Saussure's view – a series of cut

enacted simultaneously on the plane of indistinct sounds and on the plane of confused (pre)thoughts. Far from being a pure instrument in order to carry pre-given and pre-existing concepts from a sender to an addressee, language (and more specifically signifiers) seems to be the reason of the latter appearances. Thoughts, by definition chaotic and undefined as far as they remain un-expressed, become properly themselves only when, through an act of self-alienation, *are (de)composed in the bodies of the signifiers*. In a process of sound materialization they gain – retrospectively – form-as-thought with a structural *après-coup* effect according to which the consequence precede (retrospectively causing it) the cause of itself. The thought-sound emerges, through the cut provoked on the two amorphous series, in its "doubled entity" at the same time unitary yet split.

Saussure at this regard defines a language as a "domain of articulations" that *combines* the plan of thoughts and the plane of sounds while at the same time keeping them *separated*. It is a radically anti-substantialist definition given that also the very concept of amorphous indistinct mass is thinkable only retrospectively after the occurrence of the cut of the signifier. The concept of arbitrariness is thus strictly incompatible with the one of conventionality: the two series in fact do not precede their cut-connection (as it happens in the theory of language-as-nomenclature), but they are rather a consequence of it. It is impossible to attribute one series to the other (or viceversa) through a supposed free choice. In other words, the two series technically are not even cut, they rather *emerge along with the cut itself*. The problem now is: if there is no sound and no concept to be connected with each other at the beginning – given that their scission and their union is one and the same process – what constitutes the *unity* of a linguistic sign? Saussure would reply: it is constituted by its *value*.

2.6.3. A sign of value

The value of a sign cannot be derived from the gesture through which we connect the signifier with the signified because we would fall back in the paradox of the independence and autonomous existence of two series, something which is

negated by the theory of the amorphous masses. Value should be thus distinguished from signification: the typical schema of the biunivocal relation between signifier and signified (presented by Saussure earlier in the text) should be somehow relativized (if not utterly abandoned).
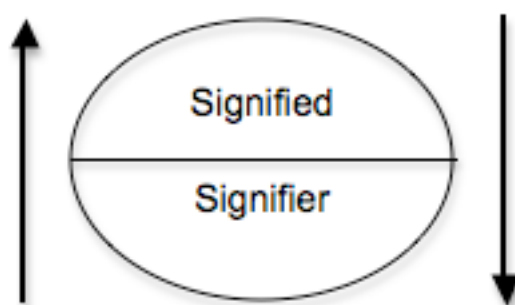
This schema is still based on a vertical movement according to which "the concept seems to be the counterpart of the sound-image."[66] On the other hand we have another complementary movement – an *horizontal* movement – according to which the "sign itself is in turn the counterpart of the other signs of language."[67] The reference movement *appears* to be the vertical connection between a signifier and its "fellow" signified, but what Saussure tries to theorize is that there is a more primary movement that articulates the entire system of interdependency of all the terms altogether. Every sign, at least ideally, presupposes in its own singular existence the simultaneous presence of all the other signs, as in the diagram:

The concept of linguistic value should be understood in quite literal terms: i.e. in its economical meaning. It is an exchange through which different equivalent terms circulate and trade places. A word can be exchanged with a dissimilar

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[66] *Idem*, p. 114.
[67] *Ibidem*.

commodity (i.e. an idea; as it happens when in the realm of circulation a certain quantity of money buys a commodity of equivalent value) or with a similar commodity (i.e. another word; as it happens when a quarter of dollar coin can be exchanged with two dimes and a nickel). What is essential is that "its content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it"[68] because intrinsically is deprived of any substantiality. A sign is defined solely by its value, that is by its relation entertained with all the other signs of a certain system: value thus is not a positive character but first and foremost "a *difference* of value."

> *Within the same language, all words used to express related ideas limit each other reciprocally; synonyms like French* redouter *'dread,'* craindre *'fear,' and* avoir peur *'be afraid' have value only through their opposition: if* redouter *did not exist, all its content would go to its competitors.[69]*

The same thing also happens with the signifiers: ['mite] and ['mi:te] are classified in Italian as different manifestation of the same signifier /mite/, while in German they express two different signifiers, as far in terms of signification as /mitte/ (downtown) and /miete/ (tight, thick). Another famous example of a system entirely based on differential relations is the neighboring states of a map. There is even a problem in topology – known as the "four colors problem" (which is an application of the Jordan's theorem) – according to which it is possible to design a map with 38 nations with only four colors (the condition is that the neighboring states will never border each other using the same color).[70] If we suppose that the states are the significations and the colors are the signifiers we can see how the differential principle can be confirmed: either we will have neighboring states with different color, or we will have states with the same colors that do not border each other. What is interesting is that with only four colors we can represent several states, which is a similar phenomenon when a single signifier can represent several significations without invalidate the differential principle.

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[68] *Idem*, p. 115.
[69] *Idem*, p. 116.
[70] Luigi Colombo, *La Struttura della parola. Da de Saussure a Lacan*, in Domenica Cosenza, Massimo Recalcati (ed.), *Lacan e la filosofia. Soggetto, struttura, interpretazione*, Arcipelago Edizioni, Milano 1992, pp. 42-70.

The same thing can also be confirmed in the alphabet writing. The value of letters is purely negative and differential. The same person can write the sign /t/ in many different ways. The only requirement is that the sign for /t/ is not to be confused in his script with the signs used for /l/, /d/ etc.

In this sense the freedom of writing style is not defined by the positive characteristics of the single sign but rather by the variation limits imposed by the system as a whole. The principle of the negative differential relations leads Sassure to the conclusion (that constitutes a principle of crucial significance for Lacan understanding of psychoanalysis):

> *In language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences* without positive terms.[71]

2.7. S1 – S2: the logic of the signifier

What is therefore the consequence of a definition of language as a system based on purely negative and differential relations, deprived of any substantiality, of any positive property and therefore reluctant to be used for a mere communicational purpose? In this question resonates an interrogation already posed by Jacques-Alain Miller: "what of structuralism is still nowadays necessary in order to grasp what is at stake in the experience of psychoanalysis?"[72] Should the link that connects psychoanalysis and structuralism be maintained, even though the hey-day of the structuralist golden age are inevitably faded away? According to Jacques-Alain Miller some of the notions which defined the core the structuralist experience remain, even now, pivotal points in order to understand

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[71] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, cit., p. 120.
[72] Jacques-Alain Miller, *S'truc dure*, in Id., *I paradigmi del godimento* (ed. by Antonio Di Ciaccia), Casa Editrice Astrolabio, Roma 2001, p. 43.

Jacques Lacan's understanding of psychoanalysis. For example, even now performs a convincing critique against a naïve notion of substance.

According to Jacques-Alain Miller strucutralism is above all an anti-substantialism. If substantialism is a doctrine according to which what makes a difference between different entities is their positive properties, structuralism turns the question inside out. Primarily we have a relation between elements, even before having accounted for what these elements in themselves positively are. The positive (as what defines an element) would come only *after* the negative (as what differentiate between elements). That means, as we already saw, that the Two (the minimal number of elements in order to *make a difference*) comes before the One (as what can be described in its positive giveness).

As it has already been underlined by Jean-Claude Milner, Lacan's interest in studying the properties of language should be reframed from the viewpoint of his main interest in the structure. Lacan is not primarily interested in understanding what are the positive properties and the role of functioning of the object-language. In this sense he is *using* Saussure in order to delineate a logic of the Two. The science of linguistic, far from being a way in order to scientifically account for what is, after all, the most relevant phenomenon of a psychoanalytic experience (i.e. the fact the people talk during an analysis), is used in order to deduce the properties of a structure. According to this hypothesis the kind of linguistic that interests Lacan revolves around two thesis: 1) a language will be analyzed only as much as one will be able to reduce its description to the minimal properties of the structure; 2) *only* the structure has this minimal properties.[73] These minimal properties are what Lacan defines as a *chain*: the most succinct definition of it is the binomial S1-S2. The problem of the analysis of the differential relations among signifiers in a language system that we saw analyzed by Sassure, will be reduced further on to its logical minimal consistency : the formula S1 − S2, which can be reduced to three propositions: 1) the relation between the elements comes before the positive emergence of the elements themselves; 2) the elements are defined by their purely negative differential

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[73] Jean-Claude Milner, *Le Périple structural. Figures et paradigme*, Editions Du Seuil, Paris 2002.

relation. In other words, what is S1? The fact of not being S2. And what is S2? The fact of not being S1 and so on; 3) the elements and the place occupied by the elements are one and the same thing (there is no difference between elements and places, the two terms are equivalent); 4) even before the relation of negative difference, there is the positedness of the relation.

We already saw the opposition between the logic of the One of the imaginary (epitomized by the dual logic of the reflected image of the Ego) and the logic of the Two (of the differential relation between signifiers), but here there is a further element to be taken into account: the primacy of the *relation* over the elements that constitute it. The scission that we saw operative in Saussure comes even before any appearance of an element. As Badiou has quite elegantly pointed out there is a primordial hidden scission in the structure S1 – S2, that comes even before the purely negative differential relation between elements, and which has the form of a *repetition* ("this is exactly the operation of the very beginning of the *Logic* [our note: Hegel's *Science of Logic*], where being and nothing are the same thing posited twice"[74]). Badiou here performs a minimal yet crucial shift: the problem is not so much the difference per se, but the *positedness* of the difference.

Even before the introduction of any qualitative differences, in the binomial S1 – S2 there is the pure double inscription of a nothing (nothing-as-such; nothing-as-placed). Given the definitive absence of any positive terms, but given also the absence of the negative-differential relation in its abstractedness, the very *difference* of placement itself cannot but be understood as a repetition.

It is this very positedness of the place (or the *act* of placement) that in reverse gives support *après-coup* to identity (nothing-as-such) and to the difference between nothing-as-such and nothing-as-posited. It is impossible in a structure S1 – S2 to claim whether before there was the element, or the place itself: *before there was the pure repetition which gives the possible ground for the very act of placement*. Lacan's definition of signifier in fact is not only the famous "that which represents a subject for another signifier," but also "that which does not

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[74] Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject,* Continuum Press, London 2009, p.5

coincide with itself": the fact that "A" can be reduplicated and placed twice makes "A" (A-as-such; A-as-placed) different from itself. "A" marked twice does not constitute an identity. "A" is different than "A." "A" does not constitute a One. Therefore we can conclude that not only a signifier is a purely negative entity, but it also a *self-related negative entity*. The binomial S1 – S2 can be the pure negative difference between two elements as much as it can be the double positedness of the same element inscribed twice as "itself," and as a "space of inscription of itself." Or it can be even the minimal difference between the nothing-as-such, and the nothing as-marked and so on. As we can see the problem of the logic of the Two is that being radically based on a purely negative relation/inscription is destined – as we will see – to constantly be haunted by the specter of the "primary inscription," a problem that will constitute for Lacan a constant danger of falling back to a metaphysics of foundation.

2.8. The irruption of the signifier

In order to try to delineate this logic of the signifier in less abstracted terms (but keeping the problem of foundation always at hand) we can recall a quite famous and almost narrative passage from Lacan's *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* where he addresses the issue of the dis-identification of the signifier from itself in an epic story of gift exchange between Danai and Argonauts:

> *Is it with these gifts [from the Danai], or with the passwords that give them their salutary nonmeaning, that language begins along with law? For these gifts are already symbols, in the sense that symbol means pact, and they are first and foremost signifiers of the pact they constitute as the signified; this is plainly seen in the fact that the objects of symbolic exchange—vases made to remain empty, shields too heavy to be carried,*

sheaves that will dry out, lances that are thrust into the ground—are all destined to be useless, if not superfluous by their very abundance.[75]

We can almost see in this passage the moment of the irruption of the signifier as a "senseless separating deviation," that breaks the symbiotic unity of the One of the Imaginary signified. It is important to note that Lacan uses here a rhetorical strategy, a moment of retrospective illusion: we know that a logic of placement does not emerge from the separation of the One from itself but rather from the pure primary repetition of a nothing. As we already saw, not only the One is not, but also the One is never originary (like it is for evolutionary psychoanalysis) but always the effect of an illusionary machine, like in the reflected imagine of the Ego. Nevertheless in the story of those objects "all destined to be useless, if not superfluous by their very abundance" we can see the withdrawal form their immediate instrumental usefulness (the One-in-itself) and the appearance of an internal void necessary for the symbolic exchange. Those "vases made to remain empty, shields too heavy to be carried" are not explainable in terms of a instrumental fullness: an internal negativity hijacked their One-ness as if they undergo a separation from themselves. A hole (or a lack) was created (an S1-S2 in the place of an illusionary unity) within the object itself which inscribe the latter in an Other register.

We can even imagine, in bringing this metaphor further, that in this shift something went wrong; as if the object went crazy: suddenly the shields ceases to be an instrument and become too heavy to be carried, the vases become too big and remain empty etc. They stop to "make One." They got divided and undergo a reduplication in themselves-as-such and themselves-as-posited. They literally cannot stay anymore in themselves and therefore become a signifier: the One become S1-S2. The One gets broken by a *lack*, and it is because of the appearance of this lack that we will have in the structure a constant and never-ending re-launching from a signifier to another and then to another etc. The signifier is by definition structured in a binomial, therefore that object that in this story we supposed to be originary One is destined to slip in the Other, than in the Other etc.

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[75] Jacques Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, cit., p. 225

In a synthetic formulation we can say that *the One is not, it is only a operation in order to repress the cut of the Two*. As it is claimed by Jacques-Alain Miller, "the structuralist hypothesis implies that the definition of the One, of every One, lies outside of itself; it is in the Other, and at this regard a division, that we can notice already at the level of the definition, is always operative."[76]

We can have another expression here of that constant *resistance to meaning* that we saw in the analysis of the speech act in the case when the ambiguous nature of the signifiers were not finding a way to imaginarize themselves in the One of the substantial meaning. If the illusionary filler of the imaginary One is not operative, the structure is destined to be trapped in a constant restlessness and movement. The metaphorical/metonymical slippage of the chain is never-ending and unstoppable. Any signifier without the reassurance of its meaning by the intersubjective play of an addressee, will always move between the subject and the uncertain and ambiguous nature of his utterances. Like in a suspension of the closed circle of communication in this symbolic restlessness of the signifier, every element is always re-launched and re-placed by another one which is re-placed by another one and so on. Even though we should not be deceived by the narrative artifice of this story, we can almost see how the void (the negativity of the cut of the Two) that we can find in the interstices between a series of two signifiers can be positivized and become an instance of movement of the entire structure itself. The negativity between S1 – S2, can become a *lack*, if we understand lack as a positive condition for the movement of the structure.

The suspension of the instrumentality in fact raises a question regarding those objects: why this shield is too heavy to be carried around? What is its purpose if its immediate use is not directly emerging from it? The question regarding this object – which is homological to the question regarding the supposed meaning of the signifiers – is none other than the subjective correlate of the lack in the structure. It is not by chance that in the early years of his teaching Lacan defines desire as a *manqué-a-l'être*: it stands as a phenomenological inscription of what,

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[76] Jacques-Alain Miller, *S'truc dure*, cit., p. 45.

at the level of the structure, is the lack that makes the movement of the whole structure itself, possible.

2.9. The foundation of the structure

The moral of this small Lacanian story is clear: the reciprocal entanglement of signifiers emerges from this very act of dis-identification, this withdrawal that enables the structural operativity of a lack; the signifier is *placed* out of itself, because of its not self-sufficiency (even though have already seen that in fact there was no such thing as a self-sufficiency in the first place, if not in the form of the retrospective myth created by the Imaginary). The problem that arises as a consequence of the constant movement of the lack is that logically a perfect structure based on negatively differential elements is destined to self-efface itself. The constant re-launching from an element to another, and then to another and then to another etc. ends up being a Hegelian bad infinity that constantly reproduces itself *ad infinitum*. Here lies the matrix of the "fight for pure prestige" engaged at the level of the imaginary: the impossibility of the One to be successfully inscribed, even at the level of the recognition of the image of the Self, is in fact already caused by the pre-existence of the cut of the signifier. The cut of the Two is primary if compared to a supposed substantiality of the One. Even at the level of the image – that we saw in the first chapter –, the determinacy of the symbolic is already over-determining the whole dialectic of the reflected instance of the Ego making it irresolvable and caught in a constant re-launching of itself.

The problem is therefore: how to *inscribe* the structure without dwelling in the illusionary myth of the pre-existence of a symbiotic and pre-structural One, but at the same without being caught in the trap where a signifier is always relaunching itself *ad infinitum* (the specter of the Hegelian bad infinity). If any element is none other than the place that it occupies – if any element is co-extensive with its place – why there should be any need to differentiate between element and place? Why the need to evoke a term like "element," if what constitutes the value in a

structure is only given by the place? A structure based only on negative differences is a self-effacing structure: the perfect structure, so to speak… is a dead structure. How then to resolve this problem?

Lacan names the problem of the foundation of the structure in many different ways along the years: phallus, self-referential signifier, unary trait, master-signifier etc. They play different roles in different context but they all embody this punctuating moment of inscription of the structure in the very act of enunciation. Another way of saying the same thing is that the inscription of the structure introduces a minimal point of positivity in a purely negative-differential relationality that allows, for example, to differentiate between elements and places; or to have the contingent *punctum* of signification (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) in a series of signifiers without being constantly haunted by their ineliminable ambiguity.

We could say that there are two axes along which we can understand the dialectic of a foundation of a structure. On one side we have the purely *transitive* horizontal interplay of exchange caused by the *lack* of the structure that assign the pairing between elements and places. It is the logic of the eternal substituibility of the signifier which is always re-launching itself outside of itself (without ever being able to stop). It is the minimal battery of the structure as binary couple of signifiers

$$S1 \text{------} S2$$

On the other side we have the *intransitive* vertical inscription of the signifying chain that blocks the *lack* as cause of the constant restlessness of the chain ($, as lack-of-being, or as a pure empty place without an elements that will go to occupy it, that as a consequence provoke the eternal movement of the structure itself) in the form of the senseless and contingent self-referential act (*a* as the indiscernible between two nothings: the nothing of the differentially-based structural relationality; and the nothing of the contingent act of inscription).

$$a$$
$$|$$
$$\$$$

The encounter of the two draws the dialectic of transitivity and intransitivity regarding the lack:

$$a$$
$$S1 \;---|---\; S2$$
$$\$$$

This schema could also be read clinically. An analytical experience begins with the transferential supposition of knowledge, where a symptomatic formation is always articulated via transference toward the discovery of a supposed repressed and unconscious knowledge (we can call this, the Freudian unconscious). It is therefore a *transitive* movement, from an interpretation to another to another etc. (always relying on the idea that a symptom is a *stand-in* for something behind it). After the many circles of interpretations, many failed interpretations, many times that a symptomatic formation is substituted with a new one etc. the very transitive movement slowly morphed itself (borrowing Badiou's term, through a torsion) to an intransitive one. Circumscribing what cannot be further interpretable, the very act of interpretation ceases to rely on the supposition of the repressed knowledge in order to isolate the *intransitive core* at the center of every symptom (what Lacan defined as *object a*). In the latter (we can call this the Lacanian unconscious), we find what is at stake in what Jacques-Alain Miller defined as "the bone of the analysis," a certain material consistency that has to be formalized and where the illusion of the One of the imaginary and the constant transitive interplay of the lack of the structure cease to be effective. We will see in the fourth chapter how Lacan will conceptualize this *intransitive* element in different form. If two of them will be taken from Freud (the anal-*object a* and the oral-*object a*), two will be, so to speak, discovered by Lacan: the *object-voice and the object-gaze*. We have therefore a fundamental passage in the theorization of the visual in Lacan, given that from the image as instance of the inscription of the One in the register of the imaginary to the image as an internal differentiation of

the Ego that goes in the direction of a logic of the Two (Ego-Ideal), we arrived now at a dimension of the visual that will be heterogeneous even in regard of the differential-negative relationality of the structure. A visual that will have the consistency of a contingent *nothing*.

Chapter 3

LACAN AT THE MOVIES

In the first chapter we saw how the specular image of the narcissistic Ego works as a an operator of the inscription of the One (in Baidou's term it is an instantiation of the *count*-for-One) in the field of the Imaginary register. Nevertheless this very operation has different degrees of effectivity, and even within the Imaginary register there are many internal differentiations; we saw how the Ego-Ideal for example forces this specularity, epitomized by the so-called "mirror stage," to be extroverted in the intersubjective social mediation and to be renegotiated in a symbolic manner. In the second chapter we saw how in Lacan prior (logically) to any possible inscription of the One, there is always already operative the cut of the Two of the structure, which is embodied by the negative differential relationality of the signifier chain (the minimal properties of the binomial S1 – S2). We also saw that because of the absence of any possible pre-symbolic One (because of the fact that the One comes *after* the Two), the re-launching of the chain – produced by an impossible-to-be-filled *lack* – exposes the structure to a constant problem of foundation.

There is thus a complex intertwining between the register of the Imaginary (the logic of the One) and the register of the Symbolic (the logic of the Two) which does not mechanically reproduce the relationship between the field of images (supposedly belonging to the former) and language (allegedly part of the latter). Therefore in order to address to role of the visual in psychoanalysis we cannot but try to articulate those two polarities together without reducing images and signifiers as two opposing principles conflicting each other. It is crucial at this regard to move from an evolutionary model – still very predominant in many psychoanalytic orientations – according to which at the center there is the problem of the evolution of the individual through different stages – i.e. a *temporal* model of causation –, to a *structural* model where temporality is secondary in respect to the relations between the elements of the structure.

With this context in mind we will develop in the following chapter some reflections regarding the way through which Lacanian conception of the Imaginary register and of the visual in general has been re-appropriated and cultivated in the field of film theory (in a specific historical conjuncture and in a specific debate). It is in fact from considering many elements present in this theoretical context that we will be able to move from a purely descriptive account of the constitution of the visual field to the interrogation regarding whether the production of moving images can make a form of re-articulation of the latter possible.

3.1. Cinema on the couch

Psychoanalysis encountered film theory in a large variety of ways in the history of cinema. We will leave aside those approaches – that we can find for example in some texts written in the Forties by psychoanalysts such as Serge Lebovici or Cesare Musatti[77] – that stress the homology, even on the level of the formal procedures, between the cinematographer and the experience of dream; and that therefore tend to underline how the spectator would find himself immersed in a pre-logical and pre-linguistic dream-like experience when watching a film. We will also not consider the tradition of aesthetic studies in psychoanalysis that used to reduce, sacrificing a formal analysis, a work of art to a pathographic inscription of a phantasmatic formations of the artist (an approach that do not fit very well in an eminently collective work of art as cinema), as it was the case with the (in)famous Freudian text on Leonardo where the perturbing smile of the Mona Lisa would have symbolized the erotic attraction of its author toward his mother.

Film Theory in fact also met psychoanalysis on a much different level, in the context of the intellectual milieu of the post-1968 France where the study of film underwent a profound renovation and a quite admirable process of theoretical

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[77] Serge Lebovici, "Psychanalise et cinéma," in *Revue Internationale de Filmologie*, n. 5, 1949 and Cesare Musatti, "Le cinéma et la psychanalise," in *Revue Internationale de Filmologie*, n. 6, 1949.

experimentation. In those years, also thank to the work of Christian Metz and to the diffusion of semiological studies under the influence of Levi-Straussian and Althusserian structuralism, a new wave of film studies works start to emerge where the influence of Marxism and structural linguistic were brought together in an original synthesis. This tendency is best represented by three groups, strongly influenced by the literary review *Tel Quel*: the cinematographic collective *Dziga Vertov*, headed by Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jean-Luc Godard; the review *Cinéthique*; the new and profoundly transformed *Cahiers du Cinéma*.[78] According to Daniel Dayan "*Cahiers* established a sort of common front with *Tel Quel* and *Cinéthique*. Their program, during the period which culminated between 1969 and 1971, was to establish the foundations of a science of cinema." There was an implicit critique of any empirical approach to cinema which did not take into account the strict rules that were at the base of "film language" as such, a field that it was possible, in a clear Althusserian fashion, to reduce to an almost-scientific set of rules (the specificity of what Metz calls "the *cinematic*"[79]). It is in this context that we can witness a shift from an attention directed to the enunciated content (the explicit film content) toward the procedures and technique of filmic enunciation (that in Jean-Louis Baudry will stand for the conditions of enunciation made possible by the "apparatus"). With a strong political twist those approaches were aimed at analyzing and dissecting the hidden ideological implication that were underlying the filmic language as such, in its intrinsic and specific rules not only in its explicit final results. The *means* of filmic productions were the core of the realization of its end. And as "means" we can define both the specificity of the material conditions of production *but also* the underlying mechanisms that regulates on a *cinematic* level (so to speak, linguistically) the conditions of enunciation. The two things must be considered together as part of the same theoretical object.

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[78] Daniel Dayan, *The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema*, in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Baudry (ed.), *Film Theory and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford 1992, p. 180.

[79] Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema. The Imaginary Signifier*, Macmillan Press, London 1982, p. 38.

What is interesting for the sake of our discussion is the strong, almost ubiquitous, role played by the reference to Jacques Lacan in this context, and especially to the notion of Imaginary that in many cases became almost a substitute for the Althusserian term of ideology (or better, it became the *visual appearance* – in the sense of the Hegelian *erscheinen* – of the general concept of ideology). Imaginary is a mediator that enables the shift from the level of the material and linguistic construction of the cinematographic enunciation to the level of the enunciated filmic object: and in doing so it also erases the traces of its own arbitrary (and therefore political) gesture. The very invisibility of the partiality and the situatedness of the form of representation becomes the *symptom* of a political mystification. What therefore seems to be a quite technical and very specific debate on the form of the specificity of the linguistic cinematographic language is immediately transposed on a political level. To bring back the study of films to its most abstract and structural level is therefore seen as a direct de-mystifying act.

What was at stake in the years of this discussion is not therefore only the idealistic claim of reducing the filmic language to the status of an almost-scientific discipline, but rather to establish in which way the production of moving images participate in the social construction of the field of visibility (and it will not be too far the moment when Michel Foucault, and later Jacques Rancière, will explicit this connection in a political theory where the notion of visibility will stand at its core). There is therefore a double movement, on one hand we have a use of psychoanalysis as an almost neutral tool that can be deployed in order to underline the structure-derived elements implicated in the linguistic enunciation as such, on the other hand we have – even though in a more indirect and implicit way, but nevertheless quite visible in a relevant number of cases – a notion of the "cinematic" as a way to dialectically intervene on the level of the social constitution of visibility, in a regime of images-production that will assume increasingly more the connotations of a ruthless ideological battlefield. It is not so much how a notion as "mirror stage" for example, could be relevant in order to underline the way through which a process of spectatorial identification could rely on some unconscious psychic mechanism; but rather whether cinema – in a social context where the operativity of the Imaginary will respond to a logic of the One –

will stand in favor of or against the One. Will it indulge in the successful inscription of the consistency of the Imaginary? Or will it try to break the captivating illusion of this ideological unity? The fact that apparently Lacan seems to give quite a problematic role to images at this level of his teaching (at least according to a certain Lacanian doxa) makes the whole debate quite delicate and extremely interesting. In the most politically-oriented edges of this debate, as it is the case for example of the review *Cinéthique*, we will see heavily stressed the role played by cinema in constructing the form of representation at the base of the relation entertained by the people with their own reality. The political implication of cinema depends on its potentiality to break the One of bourgeois ideology and its regime of representation. And the problem is not so much to choose to represent a different subject-matter (if that were the case, it would have meant to remain on the level of the represented content without changing the core of the problem) but rather to *reveal* the very process through which cinema, as a *dispositif*, is aimed self-reflectively at erasing its own process of production. Borrowing a Marxist language the group of *Cinéthique* would in fact trace a difference between an idealistic cinema which presents itself as a *mirroring* of a certain previously existing reality, and a materialist and dialectic cinema that is able to reveal the *totality* of itself, exhibiting its own process of production and its own internal contradiction. A naïve realism would be opposed to a reflective self-consciousness of its own means of production. It won't be come as a big surprise, in such a heavily politically-loaded debate, to see that such a position will end up presenting a collective text on the number 9-10 of 1971 where it will be proclaimed the necessity to leave cinema whatsoever and to directly engage on the terrain of the organization of political-cultural avanguard. The stake of the debate therefore could not be more clear: the problem is not so much to construct a new science aimed at a renovation of the discipline of Film Studies but rather to consider cinema as one of the many possible intervention in a field of images considered increasingly crucial in the construction of an ideological edifice; and in such a field to test the possibility of political intervention combined with the reflection on the intrinsic formal possibilities of the practice of creating moving-images itself.

In a debate that was extremely plural, and in some sense even theoretically chaotic, it would be difficult to summarize all the different positions and the many players involved. Even more it would be impossible to do so without a prior careful historical contextualization about the role of film journals, the emerging criticism, the relative special place occupied at that time by Paris as an intellectual capital, the difference of the anglo-saxon use of those concepts in a different context etc. We will therefore isolate three positions that we find significant both for their historical relevance and for their theoretical sofistication. The first two of them, represented by Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz will deal primarily with the question of the Imaginary and its self-effacing role of unifying principle; the third one, represented by Jean-Pierre Oudart will deal with a crucial concept in the history of Film Theory, which also incarnates many of the theoretical problem regarding the relation in Lacan between the subject and the structure: the concept of *suture*.

3.2. Jean-Louis Baudry and the problem of materialism of cinema

In the context of the shift from a theoretical attention devoted to the study of filmic enunciated contents to the techniques and procedures of cinematic enunciation Baudry moves decisively in the direction of the latter representing one of the most consistent account of a theory of cinematographic apparatus. The problem of the ideological implication of cinema do not rely on the field of what is signified but rather in what stays hidden behind the surface in the production process.

> *Does the technical nature of optical instrument, directly attached to scientific practice, serve to conceal not only their use in ideological products but also the ideological effects which they may provoke*

themselves? Their scientific base assures them a sort of neutrality and avoids their being questioned.[80]

The approach is explicitly demystifying: what before was protected by the allegedly neutrality of a scientific practice is now revealed in its non-innocent and rather political-oriented implication. Baudry is implicitly referring here to Althusser notion of the ideology of scientific practices (that should not be confused with science itself) where a presumption of neutrality is consciously enacted in order to neutralize a political implication. The problem specifically relevant for cinema is the erasure of the mechanical and technical instruments which stay progressively hidden along the production process in order to arrive at a perfectly naturalized final product at the end. The schema constructed by Baudry recalls quite faithfully a Marxian account of any form of production process. Between the passive inaugural moment – the inscription of images in the camera – and the final moment of consumption – the "release" of images from the projector – what stays in-between is none other than one thing: *work* (in the sense of expenditure of living labor). The ideological implication of a film process much more than in the elements explicitly visible in the final product (that would be accountable and eventually critiqued) would rely precisely in the *gesture* of erasure of a labor process necessary to produce the projected images as a representation correlate of reality itself at the end of the cycle. Work would be the only object which would *object* to this circular movement where apparently nothing is created but reality taken "as it is" at the beginning is released "as it is" at the end. There are already in this account many elements that we saw in the logic of the One implied in the reflected image of the "mirror stage": for example the captivating illusion that makes the individual believing that what is portrayed out there is nothing more than a passive *reflection* of his own body: a body that would already exist outside of the illusion of the mirror. But, as we already saw, the *mirror does not mirror* but rather *creates* from scratch the very image of the body as One. It is therefore a production process what happens in the "mirror stage," as much as we have a production process in the mechanical production of

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[80] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," in *Film Quarterly*, vol. 28, n. 2, winter 1974-1975, p. 40. First published in *Cinéthique*, 7-8, 1970.

moving images: in both cases it is a process that tends to dissimulate and to erase its own action.

Baudry underlines an element rather crucial which was already implied in the mirror stage itself: the mirror is an ideological mystification. There is never a pure *reflection* of an image (the very idea of reflection *is* ideology), a mechanism of creation is always included, and the very idea of reflectivity comes from an ideological point of view that is already internal to the act of dissimulation. As we have already seen in the logic of the signifier between an element and the positedness of an element there is never pure identity; also in the realm of images a pure reproduction, like in a mirror, would never entail the very same element twice: a minimal *nothing between the Two* would introduce a *difference* between the element itself and its positedness (in this case reflection) in the mirror. But the account of the process given by Baudry contains at this regard a quite enlightening insight and rather original detail. If the raw material of the shooting process is reality itself and what is projected at the end (as final product) is the very same reality, what stays between the two? If "the work is [successfully] concealed […] the consumption of the product will obviously be accompanied by ideological surplus-value."[81] The latter term strikes us for its preciseness: it will be in fact of the order of the *surplus* the object that Lacan will introduce with the term "gaze." What stays between this two identical images is none other than this minimal difference, a "gaze" in the sense of an element that it cannot be rendered visible at the level of the Imaginary because stands as a remainder of this ideological reproducibility of the Imaginary itself. We will develop the entire next chapter on the Lacanian conceptualization of the gaze (which is the true real invention created by Lacan in the study of images), but it will be enough here to underline the fact that Baudry individuates an element – embodied by the work lost in the production process between the reality-absorbed at the beginning and the reality-released at the end – which even though not visible incorporates the entire *value* of the image itself. There is therefore a dimension within the register of the visual that is not of the order of the substantial-presence, but that is of the

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[81] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," cit., p. 41.

order of the *lost* (even though it is something that while lost, it gets transformed at the end in *surplus*). Or in other terms, there is an element in the field of images that even though not visible at the level of the Imaginary experience, is nevertheless included in the image itself. It may seem a rather marginal point, but its philosophical consequences are radical and they definitely go way farer than a pure critical stance toward the dangers of ideological implication in cinema: in introducing this minimal yet invisible ideological surplus *implicated* in the image itself – in the very difference that separates recording from realizing – we can see implicitly the insufficiency of any phenomenological account of vision based on pure presence. Baudry constantly insists on the insufficiency of relying on a pure description of the final filmic product, which means first and foremost that we need something more than the pure naïve act of vision in order to understand the process of production of images. It is necessary to include a counter-intuitive move that would enable us to analyze the process in order to give visibility to what visible – if remaining on the pure act of vision of the filmic product – is not.[82]

The problem of the erasure of this minimal negativity included in the image for the benefit of an ideological reproduction of reality can take also another form according to Baudry, which is the technical construction of the illusion of

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[82]It is also interesting to note that it will be Lacan himself who after some years will underline in his Seminar XVI *D'un Autre à l'autre* the homological relationship between *object a* (one of the name of the object-gaze) and surplus-value, see Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminarie. Livre XVI. D'un Autre à l'autre 1968-1969* (text established by Jacques-Alain Miller), Seuil, Paris 2006. The circulation of Lacan's ideas did not follow directly from their presentation in the seminar. The seminars have all been published many years after their presentation and even now many of them are still unpublished (if not in the form of unauthorized transcription with a very narrow circulation). As an example, the development of the concept of *object a*, which began in 1962 with the seminar on "Anxiety," and continued in 1964 in the seminar on the "Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis" with the elaboration of the *object gaze*, despite its pivotal importance in Lacan's theory was still relatively unknown at the beginning of the Seventies (it would have been published in French only in 1973). The proof of that was that in the debate on cinema and psychoanalysis between 1969 and 1971 all the Lacanian references were almost unanimously dominated by the dialectic between Imaginary and Symbolic despite the fact that the category of the Real was already been introduced some years before and despite the fact that the very concept of *object gaze* was already known among the attendance of Lacan's seminar since 1964. This is the reason why we can say that Lacan – paradoxically – will note the homological relation between *object a* and surplus-value only "after many years" even though the Seminar *D'un Autre à l'autre* was in fact already been presented almost two years *before* the publication of Baudry's article (but we can be sure that Baudry did not know about it given that there is no trace, if not implicitly as we are claiming of the concept of object gaze).

continuity. While the recording device of the camera dissects and separates the continuity of time, the projection operates to restore it, giving a temporal dimension to a sequence of otherwise static images. The problem is that this illusion of continuity does not come despite the difference between images (therefore because of their being-static) but rather precisely *because of it*. The persistence of vision has to rely on this very small difference that should be rendered incapable of being seen as such: "In this sense we could say that film – and perhaps in this respect it is exemplary – lives on the denial of difference: the difference is necessary for it to live, but it lives on its negation."[83] How naturalized is this rather artificially produced perception of continuity can be seen in the disturbing effect which results during a projection from breakdowns in the recreation of movement, when the spectator is brought abruptly back to discontinuity. While Baudry underlines how this rupture can analogically be similar to the cut in the stream of continuity by a symptom, we find more interesting to stress on the opposite aspect: the artificially production of naturalization. At this regard the analogy with the action of the One given by the Imaginary is striking. A cinema that would have as a main task the one of *producing* a sense of continuity is a cinema that is doomed to work for the service of a logic of the One. At the same time, it is *precisely because of the artificiality of the One* that we can question the idea of its pre-existence. Even though ideological, a cinema that works toward a production of continuity it is nevertheless a cinema that realizes that this very continuity is not pre-given, but rather politically constructed.

The repression of the minimal difference that separates the images in a series is therefore the essential pre-condition for meaning to emerge. The projection mechanism in its abstract technical scope has the role of withdrawing individual images from their immobility and make movement to appear. So where conceptually does this movement come from? The solution elaborated by Baudry is strikingly Lacanian (even interestingly enough the majority of his direct references to Lacan will be used in the realm of specularity and identification): the

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[83] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," cit., p. 42.

very differences that separates image between each other is the correlate of the transcendental subject which reduces them to meaning and continuity. The two things are two side of the same coin:

> *Thus one may assume that what was already at work as the originating basis of the perspective image, namely the eye, the "subject," is put forth, liberated (in the sense that a chemical reaction liberates a substance) by the operation which transforms successive, discrete images (as isolated images they have, strictly speaking, no meaning, or at least no unity of meaning) into continuity, movement, meaning; with continuity restored both meaning and consciousness are restored.[84]*

As it is in the case of the negative mutual differences that link together the chain of signifiers, the subject of the unconscious emerges precisely in the *void* that separates them, and make their constant re-launching always precarious in terms of meaning-production. At the same time from the point of view of the chain it is the *lack* incorporated in the connection between the elements of the structure that makes the very dynamism of the structure possible. Baudry makes an analogous statement regarding the differential nature of images in a film: without the movement made possible by their minimal difference they would disappear (or reduce to photography). This movement nonetheless is granted by the continuity produced by the transcendental subject of vision without which the very impression of reality would disappear. It is interesting in fact to note that the representational feature of a film sequence is granted only if correlated with the organic factor that makes the black footage *always projected* but *never perceived* by the human eye. If we would reduce the subject to its function in the sequence of images, it would stand as the determinate negativity that divide images among each other; this would not at all entail any practice of production of meaning, that would eventually emerge only at the level of the Imaginary (where the content of images is included). Therefore Baudry so far did not strictly speaking analyze the register of the Imaginary yet, but only the *condition of possibility of the erasure of the symbolic* (which would be an *imaginary effect* but not the *Imaginary proper*),

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[84] *Idem*, p. 43.

and eventually the possibility for the register of the Imaginary to emerge. It is enough at this level to point to the pure intentionality of consciousness, deprived of any specific content.

In order for this ideological machine to finally accomplish its task it is necessary to pass from the repression of negativity and from the guarantee of continuity proper of the means of production to the specific type of identification. It is only at this level that Baudry evokes explicitly Lacan, but in a rather surprising way: analogically superimposing the elements at the base of the "mirror stage" with the empirical conditions of every spectatorial experience.

> *But for this imaginary constitution of the self to be possible, there must be – Lacan strongly emphasizes this point – two complementary conditions: immature powers of mobility and a precocious maturation of visual organization (apparent in the first few days of life). If one considers that there two conditions are repeated during cinematographic projection – suspension of mobility and predominance of visual functions – perhaps one could suppose that this is more than a simple analogy.*[85]

In fact, it *does* look like a simple analogy. The reasons are several. The problem of the constitution of the Ego does not emerge from a pure experiential account of what are the conditions that enable the experience of the "mirror stage" to be produced: we saw how narcissism responds to a rather more complex and differentiated dialectic where the dual specularity of the mirror is transposed on a different and mediated level. The polarity of pure *reflection* and the polarity of inter-subjective *recognition* are deeply intertwined with each other and never present themselves in their pure form. The recognition of one's own image in the mirror cannot be reduced to a certain primary fundamental experience that would further direct the development of a human being (as it is in the model of evolutionary psychoanalysis): rather it responds to a *principle*, i.e. that of the *reflection*, according to which something is believed to pre-exist in its pure form and subsequently gets reproduced "as it is" by a mirror. It is an implicit admission

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[85] *Idem*, p. 45.

of the prior existence of the One, against the idea claimed by Lacanian structuralism (and Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*) that at the beginning there is the pure scission, even before the positive emergence of the elements of the structure. This point, as we saw, has in fact been already developed by Baudry himself when addressing the "ideological surplus-value" contained in the cinematographic representational image. *The One is not*: this is the crucial political statement that is implicit in the debate started by *Cinéthique* regarding the relationship between cinema and ideology. And an analysis of cinematographic ideological apparatus, in the literal meaning of ideological machinery, can be fruitful in order to understand how, prior to any consideration regarding the level of individual identification in the filmic text, there is a more fundamental level which pertains to the imaginary texture of the constitution of reality; a level where images, in their historical determination, play a rather fundamental role in enforcing the inscription of the One.

Baudry's position at this regard looks quite uncertain. He oscillates between a radical recognition of the power of the operator of the One in constituting its regime of efficacy and its erasure of the minimal difference/negativity, and a more compatible idea of a hidden truth behind the ideological mystification. In several passages it seems that the One constituted by the Ideological Filmic Apparatus should be substituted with a more primary One: the transparency of the production process where supposedly a primary truth – the *work* implied in the production process but rejected in the final product – could be found. It is a naïve notion of a transparency where the logic of the One is not questioned in its radical *raison d'être*, but rather substituted with another… *One*. It is no surprise that *Cinéthique* at this regard supported a self-reflective notion of materialist cinema able to tell everything about itself and to exhibit its own proper materials and contradictions, against a cinema that would still be haunted by the ideological mystification of representation. The problem lies in the fact that even a self-reflective move toward the disclosure of the means of production (or even the linguistic procedures as in Godard's *La Chinoise*) could lead to a new form of substantialization. The narcissistic idealization that dwells in the captivating dimension of the One *is not* made possible by some empirical conditions of

experience – "the immature powers of mobility and a precocious maturation of visual organization" – but is rather constructed as a *logic* of rejection of scission. From the One of representation is rather easy to pass into the One of self-reflexivity (as it happened with postmodernism) without changing the conditions that makes this very logic to be effective and operative.

A materialist cinema cannot rely on a pre-given notion of materiality regarding the material or linguistic conditions of production of an image but it should rather consider another direction: the one epitomized by the minimal difference that renders an image impossible to be reduced to its empirical determination (both at the level of the materials of its production and of the characteristics of its supposed visibility). It is on that register that Lacan developed a concept – like *gaze* – where visibility itself will split internally in order to expose an element that can be detected only through a *traverse* of the subjective conditions but that does not emerge on the level of the Imaginary. It is only at that level that is possible to by-pass the empiricist claim on cinema and to address a true materialism of the *nothing* that is the gaze.

3.3. The Imaginary Psychoanalysis

If we briefly evoke the position epitomized by Christian Metz is because it is somehow emblematic of a certain academic use of psychoanalysis applied to Film Studies. We are dealing here with what Metz himself defined as a "contribution" to the study of film language in the context of an epistemology that is clearly (even though implicitly) mutuated by the empirical sciences. Metz is more interested to use psychoanalysis in order to highlight some specificities of film language than inserting it in the broader context of an analysis of the visual as such (as it was done to some degrees by Baudry's analysis or by the group of *Cinétheque*). Films are considered a consistent and given object of analysis and a different variety of disciplines can be useful in order to penetrate in the hidden core of this item at the service of the most possible coherent form of description. At this regard many instruments can be used: semiology, sciences (for the study

of apparatus), history, sociology, anthropology, psychology etc. and among them a certain place can be reserved also for the "specificity" of psychoanalysis. According to Metz in fact psychoanalysis is one among many disciplines (but "it cannot be the only one") "concerned with the study of the cinematic signifier."[86] And as such, it needs to be articulated with other ones such as linguistic, classical semiology etc. It comes as no surprise that regarding these approaches Francesco Casetti, in his book on the history of cinema theories, puts them in the section of the methodological theories. Casetti underlines that "psychoanalysis is not characterized by a 'method' in the same way as the other disciplines" but he quite appropriately concludes that "psychoanalysis of cinema has generally behaved like any other scientific approach, establishing criteria of pertinence, interpreting data, elaborating models, and seeking verifications of its postulates."[87] At this regard Christian Metz can be considered as the main example of such an approach, both in his significant achievements and in his inevitable problematic flaws.

His point of departure is a realization that cinema, like theater, painting, music etc. has a proper and specific form of linguistic articulation: the *cinematographic*. Therefore he draws comparisons between the strategies of enunciation of written or spoken languages and the meaning-making abilities that pertains to cinema as such. The study of cinema at this regard will not be very different from any other form of linguistic articulation (there are countless rhetorical passages in *The Imaginary Signifier* where he confronts the specificity of cinema with other arts like theater, literature etc. implicitly underlining the fact that their articulation is subjected to similar and comparable rules) and should be therefore studied "as it were a language." A formulation of such a kind could be more deceiving than it seems at first, given that a comparison with language can be brought in quite different directions. When Lacan for example said in his very famous maxim that "unconscious is structured like a language," it could mean two very different things: either that unconscious is subjected to the same rules and articulations that

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[86] Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema. The Imaginary Signifier*, cit., p. 17.
[87] Franesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945-1995*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas 1999, p. 159.

organizes language – and therefore it is the study of language can makes us deal in the most precise way with the experience of psychoanalysis – or rather that both language *and* psychoanalysis are organized under the rules of the structure. The accent placed in the sentence can entail a whole difference set of consequences: one thing is saying that "psychoanalysis is structured *like a language,*" a very different one is saying that "psychoanalysis *is structured* like a language." Christian Metz will go in the first direction, while Lacan goes in the second one.

 We already saw in the second chapter that this point has been developed in an extremely effective way by Jean-Claude Milner in his work on the relations between Lacan and structuralism: "[He] was studying language treating it as a system whatsoever and considering it only through the minimal properties"[88] deducible from it. Lacan had to pass through a scientific study of language not because the common experiential phenomenon in psychoanalysis is the fact that people do talk, but only as a subordinated way in order *to deduce the minimal properties of a general structure underlying it* (which – as we already saw – are the rules of the minimal binomial S1 – S2). The concept of signifier is taken from linguistic but it is not articulated as a linguistic entity: it is rather defined as an element that belongs to a system only through its minimal properties of inclusion (like the non-substiantial negative differential relation). The use of psychoanalysis developed by Metz stands on the contrary as its opposite side, as it is clear in his definition of psychoanalysis as a mere "science of the symbolic":

> *Linguistic and psychoanalysis are both sciences of the symbolic and are even, come to think of it, the only two sciences whose immediate and sole object is the fact of signification as such (obviously all sciences are concerned with it, but never so frontally or exclusively). To be slightly cavalier, linguistic – together with its close relations, notably modern symbolic logic – can be regarded as taking for its share the exploration of the secondary process, and psychoanalysis that of the primary process:*

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[88] Jean-Claude Milner, *Le Périple structural. Figures et paradigme*, cit.

that is to say, between them they cover the whole field of the signification-fact *taken in itself.*[89]

What interests Metz is the analysis of the "fact" of signification, and in order to accomplish that task is the use of psychoanalysis in order to bring to the surface some primary processes that would have not been visible from a purely descriptive account of the strategies of signification. From an approach of such a kind many problems derive: a substantialist account of the unconscious and a confusion between the category of the individual and the notion of subject: both these elements can be found in his analysis of cinema as a specular identification.

Metz attributes to cinema a mobilization of a larger axes of perception given that it entails both visual and auditory experiences (linguistic and non-linguistic audition, movement, real temporal progression). If compared to other arts such as literature or music is therefore *more perceptual* (that is why, he underlines, is sometimes considered as the "synthesis of all others arts"). But at the same time if compared to theater, opera or other spectacles of the same type does not mobilize real people and real action on the stage with all the experiential elements involved. At this regard it can be considered as *less perceptual* given that all those perceptions are in a sense "false": they are replica of real-existing things and persons; they are their shade, their phantom, their double. The "other scene" where all this perceptions happen is the flat screen, and not a proper "scene" like a stage. This fact alone gives cinema a status of a phantasmatic presence: "more than the other arts, or in a more unique way, the cinema involves us in the imaginary: it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence, which is nonetheless the only signifier present."[90] But here there is a catch: while in theater the imaginary effect is given through an absence mistakenly believed as a presence expressed through the stage, in cinema we have a double absence (the one of the story portrayed *and* the one of images). The images creates the illusion of a presence, but all of this unfolds *on the basis of a fundamental absence*, an absence which constitutes the cinema signifier as

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[89] Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema. The Imaginary Signifier*, cit., p. 18.
[90] *Idem*, p. 45.

imaginary. There is an effect – instead of a suspension of disbelief – a *doubling up of belief.* Therefore instead of having as it is in theater, or in the mirror stage itself, an absence that is convoked through a presence, there is *an absence that itself invokes an absence.* The problem would be: how to construct out of this double absence a doubled up belief?

This premise in Metz's view makes the whole issue of identification to emerge as extremely pivotal and worth to be carefully analyzed and developed. If the linguistic articulation of elements were exhaustive in order to explain the cinematic processes of enunciations, the specificity of cinema would not be very different than any other kind of linguistic phenomena. The true enigma to be explained in Metz's view is rather related to the spectatorial experience: how is it possible to trigger a process of identification over a phantasmatic screen (or a doubles absence)?

It is because of this approach that psychoanalysis will be turned into a phenomenological explanation aimed at addressing the problem of spectatorial identification. Despite its focus on linguistic-derived strategies of enunciation, psychoanalysis is understood by Metz as a discipline devoted at understanding the processes through which a certain mode of enunciation, developed at the level of universality, is particularized at the level of individuality. And in doing so he sacrifices one the most crucial differences that characterizes Lacan's teaching: the separation between individual's interpellation and structural determinacy (where the subject of unconscious emerges). The "mirror stage" ends up playing the following role:

> *The film is like a mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body [...] Thus, what* makes possible *the spectator's absence from the screen [...] is the fact that the spectator has already known the experience of the mirror (of the true mirror) and is thus able to*

> *constitute a world of objects without having first to recognize himself within it.[91]*

Metz supposes that because the spectator has already known "the experience of the mirror" in his personal past, he is conscious of the difference between himself as subject (in this case it would be called individual) and the objects surrounding him: therefore it would be redundant to have this explicit *depiction* of his own body sealed by the screen. Metz even comes to the conclusion that cinema is part of a secondary activity, and thus the "primitive undifferentiation of the ego and the non-ego has been overcome."[92] Here Metz misses the crucial lesson of Lacanian structuralism: there is a radical intertwining between imaginary and symbolic and never a mere succession of different phases. According to him, the successful separation of ego and non-ego after the "mirror stage" would bring the subject to the field of secondary (social) identifications where cinema would play its part; but in fact the second moment is only an internal expression (an internal differentiation) of the first. A pure moment of dual specularity (an Imaginary as a self-enclosed entity) would be radically self-destructive in the absence of a minimal symbolic cut (that in fact is there from the very beginning, and it definitely does not come to existence only in a second moment); that is why the "mirror stage" cannot be reduced to the level of a real life-experience, and it is even more illegitimate to deduce from there an analogical matrix from which understanding subsequent objectual relations. The main error is to account the "mirror stage" *on the formal level* (like in a *Gestaltpsychologien*), and from there to develop a theory of secondary identifications where the latter experiences "seem" to reproduce the recurring empirical elements encountered in the past. The problem is inevitably relying on some sort of factual evidences where the Imaginary is reduced to the accountable generalities of the mirror stage event (immature powers of mobility, precocious maturation of visual organization etc.). What Lacan on the contrary invites us to do is taking leave from any form of psychological description of phases maturation and to embrace an entirely logified model based on structural causality. The Imaginary is thus first and

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[91] *Idem*, p. 46.
[92] *Ibidem*.

foremost a *logic*: a way to repress and to erase the cut of the Two and the primacy of the scission. It is from these premises that a thought of cinema can go beyond its most immediate phenomenological description in order to account for its role in the action of the structure. It will be the direction taken by Jean-Pierre Oudart and then by others in the context of a large and flaming debate surrounding the concept of *suture*.

3.4. The Suture and the Lack

The concept of suture in Film Studies was introduced by Jean-Pierre Oudart in a two-parts article published in 1969 on the issues 211 and 212 of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*; an intervention that triggered a wide echo of reactions and responses and left a permanent influence in the tradition of Lacanian Studies applied to film analysis that persists until today. Differently than Jean-Louis Baudry or Christian Metz, it was an intervention where the references to Lacan's work were for the first time brought outside of the always recurring mention of the dialectic between Imaginary and Symbolic and outside of the continuous association of "mirror stage" and cinematographic screen. The term *suture* in fact did not come specifically from Lacan himself, but from one of his youngest and most talented pupil of the time, who will become after many years his most important interpreter and, perhaps even more importantly, the most significant follower of Lacanian-oriented psychoanalysis after the *maître*'s death: Jacques-Alain Miller. The large debate that followed the publication of Oudart's article involved many theorist and film critics outside of the French cinema milieu, first in England, and then in the United States such as Stephen Heath, Kaja Silverman, William Rothmann, Daniel Dayan. It would be impossible here even to briefly summarize the leading traits of such a vivid debate that went on for many years and had a lot of original and insightful contributions. We will nevertheless try to trace – referring to these two texts (Oudart's intervention, and Jacques-Alain Miller source) – a common problem: the foundational question regarding the relation between the subject and the signifier chain in a structuralist account of psychoanalysis, and the way through which this theoretical problem emerged in

the field of Film Theory. Miller's text influence – it is worth to be noticed – is omnipresent in Oudart's intervention (according to Alain Badiou *Suture: Elements of the Logic of Signifier*[93] is "the first great Lacanian text not to be written by Lacan himself"[94]) and it will mark profoundly Oudart's argumentation.

As we saw at the end of the second chapter, in Lacanian understanding of structuralism we are dealing with a fundamental problem: a structure is based on elements that do not have any positive properties, but whose only properties are the one of being *different* from each and every other fellow-element of the structure. In such a structure there is strictly speaking no difference between an object with positive properties, *and* the place that this same element occupies: element and place are one and the same thing. The element has one and only one property, it is not any of the other units of the chain, and therefore there is no possible positive accountability of it that is not based on its unsubstantial difference. The foundational problem that Lacan will end up being forced to confront is that there is a certain dialectic between internal differences of the chain (the eternal slippage of the binomial S1 – S2), and the difference from the structure as such and its outside, that needs to be contemplated. *Suture* is the name of this short-circuit in which the ineliminable precariousness of the elements of the structure, and a foundational first principle outside of the structure are overlapped one unto the other, giving a tentative solution to the problem. It is the appearance of the master-signifier (or phallus): a signifier which is not caught in the circle of mutual and negative differentiality, but that stands in as a representative of the structure as such. If we consider the entire series of signifier as a set, the phallus/master-signifier is a signifier that do not belong to the set of the signifiers; the Lacan of the XX Seminar would have said that it is the "excluded element" that makes possible for all the other signifiers to belong to the set. It is a solution that – we will see – will not solve all the problems. If we posit a structure based on purely negative-differential relations, we have the problem of

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[93] Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture. Elements pour une logique du signifiant," in *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, n. 1, 1966, pp. 37-49. English translation is forthcoming in Peter Hallward, Knox Peden (ed.), *Concept and Form: Selection from Cahiers pour l'Analyse. Part 1*, Verso, London – New York 2012.
[94] Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 25.

the *internal* differentiation of its elements (a perfect negative-based structure is paradoxically a self-effacing structure) – there would be no resources to explain how the multiplicity of the real would be generated by it –; on the other hand the solution of the external foundational meta-element goes very close to a unexplained metaphysical first principle. The short-circuit between level and meta-level risks to superimpose two wrongs in order to make a right, leaving the main philosophical issue at stake inevitably unanswered.

The way through which Oudart uses this concept in cinema theory is eminently analogical: if suture designates "the relationship of the subject to the chain of its discourse"[95] the problem transposed to cinema would be the relationship between the subject and the internal articulation of images. Prior to any semantic concern, in every filmic field there is always echoed an absent field. It is called the Fourth Wall, or in Oudart's term: the absent One; an hypothetic field that is never visible as such but always implied, and in front of which all the action takes place. It is an imaginary space because it is put there by the viewer's projection, but even though unrecognized in many cases, it is by definition present in every frame. "At a certain moment of the reading all the objects of the filmic field combine together to form the signifier of its absence"[96] which is exactly the moment when the full immersion of the spectator "is undermined by the awareness of the frame as such."[97] In this precise moment the image ceased to be a correlate of an experience of fullness (it ceases to express an Imaginary *béance*), it is cut and it is exposed to a lack. It is recognized that the image lacks something and it thus enters "the domain of the signifier" where it has to re-launch itself to an other place: the image becomes the signifier of an Other scene, of an Absent. Its being-there is the figure of a reference to an Other.

But instead of dwelling in this anxious sense of absence, the image-as-signifier is followed by the proper "suturing" shot, i.e. the complementary point of view

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[95] Jean-Pierre Oudart, *Cinema and Suture*, in Nick Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma. Volume 3 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation. An anthology from* Cahiers du Cinéma *nos 210-230, March 1969- June 1972*, Routledge, London 1990, p. 48.

[96] *Idem*, p. 46.

[97] Slavoj Žižek*, The Fright of the Real Tears. Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, British Film Institute, London 2001, p. 32.

which converts the void in a *place*, which is none other than the point from which the Absent is looking. It is crucial to underline how this very act of articulation serves the purpose of retrospectively negating the very existence of the void. What was previously perceived as an Absence is not only filled in the following shot, but it is also retrospectively negated "as absence." That Absent that exposed the first image to the anxiety of the void will become none other than the correlate of the gaze of another One and thus suppressed. Between the two shots there is not only a relation of succession, but of signification: the first shot gets signified by the second one, and vice versa.

The articulation of different signifiers tends to form a "signifying Sum" where a single shot holds the signification surplus given by the addition on the previous one in an ideal superimposition of the two. But if on one hand a shot is always the Sum of itself and the previous one, on the other hand it will also stand for a first element in the following Sum, and as such it will call for a subsequent suturing closure by the following shot. In a dialectic between presence and absence, and absence and presence, the succession of different shots will constitutes both a *surplus effect* of meaning-production *and* a *withdrawal from meaning* being constantly traversed by a sense of subtraction and by the necessary evocation of the Absent. The process of coupling of images, with the essential mediation of the subject in front of which the Absent One is constantly evoked, it will therefore recall the sequence of signifiers where the ambiguous nature of their connection in terms of meaning will be accompanied by the Imaginary closure of their meaning production (sealed by the confirmation by the addressee in the logic of inter-subjective recognition).

A large part of this debate was also devoted to an analysis of the technique of shot/counter-shot where we can see in action the double movement through which the void is first evoked and then suddenly rejected. There is at the same time a dependency from the logic of absence (without which there would not be any signifying procedure, given that in the fullness of being no act of meaning production would be possible) but also a constant repression of it through the suturing movement. The dialectic of *suture* is therefore the correlate of the

movement of the lack in the structure: it is the lack that enables the structure to always rearticulate itself, but on the other hand the structure needs to suppress this very lack at every cycle in the point of emergence of meaning. Oudart – differently than others' understanding of Lacanian psychoanalysis applied to cinema all devoted to underlining the dialectic of imaginary identification – does not reduce the production of moving-images to the level of immediacy and duality; he rather articulates the chain of images according to the principle of the agency of the *lack*. It is the action of the lack that makes possible any procedure of signification to emerge, and it is the lack as well that enables the sequence of images to pass from a discrete series of unities to a dialectic of attraction where each and every one of them is always absorbed in a continuous movement of substitution and succession. On another level the closing gesture of suture is also relevant from the point of view of the position of the subject. It stands in fact as a tentative mediation between two principles that until now have always been opposite to one another: the logic of the personalistic and Imaginary interpellation of the One (i.e. the Ego, or ideological concepts such as persona, consciousness, emotions etc.) *and* the structural position of the subject as pure unsubstantial and fluctuating *place* in the minimal difference between images or between signifiers. It will be only through the conceptualization of a third register, i.e. the Real, that what seems to inevitably led to a theoretical *cul-de-sac* will reach a different form of conceptualization.

The paradox of suture is that it tries to short-circuit in one theoretical gesture a paradoxical synthesis between two opposing movements. From a certain point of view the structure is constantly moving because of the chaining of the elements among each others; but on the other hand this movement risks to look like a static loop if we see it from the point of view of the lack itself. The multiplicity of elements are actually multiple only as long as their movement is caused by the agency of the lack, otherwise the variables would be reduced to two: the structure, which would not be able to consist in itself given its purely negative differential system of relations; and a lack which would lack only in a relation to the something else. We have therefore a paradoxical situation where the overlapping (or suturing one onto the other) of two *nothing* will give as a result the complex

articulation of several elements: *the Two* of the minimal chain (S1 – S2), the *lack* as a cause of the movement of the structure, *the subject* as the interstitial *void* between the elements ($), and *enunciation* (or signification) as a machinical effects of the alternation and movement of those elements. At this regard the suture itself cannot but look like a foundational (and metaphysical) principle in order to explain how from the minimal properties of the structure the multiplicity of the real can be engendered (in language, or in cinema according to Oudart etc.).

The structure can maintain an impression of extreme dynamicity only if seen from the point of view of the different combinatorial possibilities of the elements *once they are already caught in the machine of the structure* (therefore the series S1, S2, …, Sn and their endless possibilities). If we rather look at this process from the meta-level of the elements involved we see an alternation according to a quite rigid distribution of places (S1 – S2 – *lack*) which would constitute a rather problematic account given that the primacy of the scission of Two would risk inevitably to fall back in a certain hidden form of the One (in this case, the One of the rigid distribution of the places in the structure). This is a common problem for any dialectical thinking: the unity of opposites (like the *structure* of the scission, or *a* structure *of the Two*) can also mean that the One would be able to overdetermines to Two of the scission and to subsume it to a unified principle.

In a radical logic of the Two the opposites are heterogeneous or unalignable, therefore it is impossible to rely on a certain rigid designator regarding the distribution of the places, otherwise the risk is to understand the scission as a static correlation (even if in the form of the apparent movement of the structure). Suture might end up in a metaphysical idealism where the heterogeneity of the scission is sublimated in a more primary form of One.

3.5. The Clinamen and the Force

The issue of the relations between the elements and the meta-level of their foundation in Lacanian structuralism was developed by Alain Badiou in *Theory Subject* in a very enlightening way. According to him in Lacan and in structuralist

dialectic in general there is a certain relation between a weak structuralism deployed on the level of the dialectic between places within the structure and a strong structuralism which is expressed in the straightforward difference structure/non-structure or inside-outside. The problem – excluding any suturing act – is how these two levels get reflected one unto the other given that there is not a pure point of demarcation between them. Badiou makes a detour through ancient Greek atomism recalling through different steps in which way the strong difference void/atoms was dialectized as a weak differentiation in order to address the reason of the existence of different forms of atomic aggregates in the world: i.e. the question of the passage from the structure to the world

For the Greeks the only two principles at the base of the world are atoms and void. Nothing else do exist. But the problem is from that principle to explain how is it possible to have all the different aggregates that populate this world? Which kind of relation could be entertained between the series of atoms and the void? What is at stake in fact is the principle of the *relation* between the two, if there weren't any possible connection between atoms and void, nothing could ever be created. As in every negative-differential structure, an atom is defined only for being entirely external to the void, and the same happens for the void relating to the atom. If thus they were both persisting in their complete external indifference, without ever touching each other, nothing would have ever being caused. Everything – atom and void – would just strive in their own univocal existence; they would just stay there without ever influencing each other, and without ever being able to cause anything that is not their continuous persistence. But there is a second step, which is the one according to which it is the void itself that engenders the movement of the atoms. It is the very first step in the direction of a possible rapport between the two series, but even here the problems are far form being resolved: if the void causes the movements of atoms, shouldn't it apply equally to all the atoms in the very same way (given that there is no positive qualitative property that differentiates atoms among them)? How would it be explained that atoms have *different* relations to the void given that there are diverse atomic aggregates (and therefore different movements)? In the case of a homogeneous relation to the void "the movement is perfectly null, for lack of a

reference point with which to mark it – the simultaneous and isotropic vection of an infinity of atoms, without the shadow of a doubt, being equivalent to their absolute immobility."[98]

In order to pass from the difference void/atoms to the plurality of the world there should be a translation from the strong difference to the weak one. In order to do so, a third element should be introduced: the *clinamen*. The problem in fact, is not that void and atom are too much unrelated with each other, but rather they are too much looking alike, they are too close. Their own definition is none other than "being *different*" than the opposite series, therefore their own being is literally *placed* in the other one. Their places are too much looking alike, as if there were a One mediating their distance and the distributing the *ratio* of their relation. The *clinamen* engenders a moment obliqueness, a principle of chance in the rigidity of the distribution of the places; in the homogenous rain of atoms it creates the unforeseeable and accidental contingent encounter that makes *a difference* to emerge. In Lacanian terms we can say that the *clinamen* is an *obstacle* that *objects* the perfect distribution of places by the One and the definition of the series as purely negative-differential. In order to create something out of the structure (Badiou calls it a "whole"), the One-ness of the structure must fall down ("A whole is always a death of the One"[99]). In a sense it is only as a consequence of this moment of obliqueness that the two opposing series can emerge as such in their particularity. Two series in their purity come to nothing; they are able to come to existence only after the *clinamen* triggered the chance that upset their mutual distribution of places. In order to have two series we thus have to have "something more" than a Two; or better said, we have to have not the Two as regulated by a One, but the Two as an un-homogenizable dialectical and antagonistic scission. As it was clear also to Gilles Deleuze in *Logic of Sense*, two series in order to enter the machinial productivity of the structure cannot be Even, they have to be Odd. What he refers to as the object = x (the Lacanian *object a*, or in this case the chance introduced by the *clinamen*) is what *objects* the biunivolcal coordination that would make the two series to fall back in a logic of the One.

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[98] Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, Continuum Press, London – New York 2009, p. 57.
[99] *Idem*, p. 58.

The clinamen though, should not be reduced to a certain "entity," it rather represents a singular and contingent deviating *occurrence* that makes an atom to move in a different way than all the other ones. It is first and foremost an internal fortuitous behaviour of the atom itself, and in doing so this atom *marks the void* since it is affected by the void differently than the others atoms. The void ceases to be an external determinacy and it is counted as an internal determinacy in the series of atoms. We can say that the clinamen engenders *the infra-atomistic mark of the void itself.*

> *It is here that strong difference begins its involution into weak difference, since the opposition between the deviating atom (or rather of the clinamen as the act of this atom) and the atom as pure principle reinscribes from one atom to another, and thus within the same kind of principle, the absolute heterogeneity of the void of the atom.*[100]

The clinamen at this regard represents a fundamental resource in order to address the problem of the structure without falling into the foundational and metaphysical *cul-de-sac* of suture. As Badiou states very clearly *clinamen* is not an explicatory concept, it is not the principle according to which the relation between series should be explained; it is a retrospective occurrence that serves the purpose of introducing a logic that liberates the relation in the structure from the strict determination of the One. The structure in this way ceases to be a way in order to explain the engenderment of the diverse variety of the world (with an enormous risk of falling into an idealistic trap), but it rather reveal its attachment to the chance of Being. Far from evoking a foundation principle as it is with the suturing gesture, Badiou exposes structuralism of its materialist edge.

Contrary to the master-signifier, *clinamen* does not pertain to the void, neither to the atoms, but at the same time it is not even a third principle (that would engender all the paradox of the atom/void relation). It is the dialecticity of the principles, that makes the strong difference to be rearticulated in the guise of a weak one. The philosophical (but also political) problem would be therefore: how

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[100] *Ibidem.*

to expose the chain of the weak differences to its strong and materialist ground in order to oppose the idealist structural claim that the interplay among places is the only game in town?

Suture on the contrary risks to enforce a distribution of elements according to a principle of One that renders the series S1-S2-*lack*-$ as the only alternation in order to engender the productivity of the sense. The structure needs to be exposed to what is not contemplated in the logic of the distribution of the places by the One: the *outplace of the void*; what Badiou re-named in *Theory of the Subject* as "force," and that is none other in Lacanian terms than the concept of the Real. We will see in the next chapter how the Real will be also dialectized as an outplace of the principle of the structure, and it will come to occupy, in order to expose structuralism to this materialist ground, the place of a mathematical variable: the letter *a*.

If the passage between a strong difference to the interplay of a weak one happened because of the act of a chance occurrence, the problem would be how to re-expose the strict distribution of places of the structure to that same *outplaced* "force." There has been a clinamen, an atom is deviated, but then everything disappeared and turned back to the weak difference of places with the never-ending interplay involved. All the atoms at this regards are the same, and no one of them keep the memory of the deviation caused by the single touch of the clinamen. But it is crucial to see that this "force" passed from the strong difference to the weak one in order to disappear and to effect "the Whole" from which it has disappeared from: "to think the real amounts to thinking the self-annulation of that which makes the real in general possible."[101] "Vanishing term" is the term that Badiou uses in order to evoke this spectral and fluctuating disappeared element which do not disclose itself *as element* in the interplay of differences but is at the same time everywhere and nowhere. The political problem would be how to give to this "vanishing term" which does not have any place in the structure its form of appearance. The difference that separates this elements from the excluded-inclusion of the phallus is the same that differentiate

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[101] *Idem*, p. 62.

a definitive spatialization of the structure (according to the rule of the One), from the outplace-ness of "force": "the vanishing term disappears only insofar as *nothing* is included that matches it, except the power of inclination in general, which it has grounded by breaking with the One. How? By means of a *coup de force*."[102] The *clinamen*, as an occurrence of chance, is retrospectively exposing the truth of a structuralism that is unwilling to recognize its materialistc core. How to expose this rejected ground of chance through a *coup de force*? As Mallarmé says "chance is conquered word by word."[103] And we will see, with the help of the late, materialist Lacan, that vision will also have a role in this.

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[102] *Idem*, p. 63.

[103] Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Mystery in Letters*, in Id., *Divagations* (translated by Barbara Johnson), Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 236, quoted in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, cit., p. 61.

Chapter 4

A *MATTER* OF GAZE

4.1. 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.[104]

What will it happen if we would try to go through the mirror in order to see how things are behind it? What is Alice exactly searching for on the other side of the mirror? And why there would be something more interesting beyond it? After all, isn't the mirror only reflecting what is already on *our* side of it? *Alice Through the Looking Glass* starts during a boring afternoon when Alice and Kitty are playing while imagining how the house (what they believe is on the other side of the mirror) would look like. The curiosity arise: "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." But the problem is 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" that triggers her curiosity and her desire to cross the threshold and to experiment directly how it is to live beyond that boundary. In Lewis Carrol things are always upside down and mirrors do not

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[104] Lewis Carrol, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, Chartwell Books Inc., New York 2009, pp. 19-20.

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 Seventies risks to clash against a small opaque detail: the impression that instead of reflecting, there is something hidden. It is an apparently minimal shift that nevertheless will have some major consequences also for our understanding of the image and for the passage from Imaginary to the Real of the visual: the mirror ceases to reflect and becomes a screen. Instead of giving back things as they are, it start 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 does not get reflected. There is a remainder that is left out in what otherwise seems to be a purely passive act of reflection. Lacan already showed in the dialectic of the Imaginary, which usually visual arts are 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 build 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 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-relations 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 needs to be denounced and accused of ideological mystification, and at the end it needs to be brought back to the real source of its appearance: the cut of the Two of the structure.

The mirror therefore facilitates an illusionary trap, and in doing so 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. Lacan starting from the mid-Sixties will start to analyze this element that is left out in the dialectic of Imaginary and mirror: a little remainder, a small letter: *a*. As in *Alice* it is enough that the mirror ceases to perfectly reflects its images back to viewer and starts to spot a minimal opaqueness (the "THAT bit" that Alice wants to achieve) in order to become a screen. The *a* is the small contingent intruder that morphs a mirror into a screen. Because of *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 shouldn't be too quick in dismissing the Imaginary and reduce it to a register completely external to any asymmetrical intruder. It is important in fact when dealing with Lacan to not reduce the sequence of the different registers as a temporal succession. If we were doing 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 at 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 ab-solutely achieve its own consistency if not through the Symbolic, and the Symbolic cannot found itself if not through point of suture to the Real etc. In late-Seventies Lacan will develop topologically those relations with the figure of the borromean knot, where every register comes to both incarnate and 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 not reduce the intrusion of *a* to a transcendent beyond.

Lacan will construct a very refined and counterintuitive formalization of *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 during the elaboration of the Imaginary during the Fifties. Something nightmarish, something slightly uncanny was already operative in the very dialectic of narcissistic recognition. The articulation of Symbolic and Imaginary registers developed in the first two chapters already showed that the mirrored narcissistic image cannot inscribe directly itself but it gets refracted, rearticulated and multiplied in an infinite series of identifications, projections and intersubjective mediations that makes the pure tale of the 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 haunt even the most successful inscription of the structure. There is therefore a double movement that should be considered: on one hand the *quantitative* dimension in the dialectic between the One and the scission – the unifying principle of the Imaginary gets replaced the cut of the Two 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 which is 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 of the double. The Ego is always inhabited by a certain minimal foreignness, by an excessiveness out of control. It is the same shadowy dimension that makes the "fight of pure prestige" engaged with the fellow-image always in danger to precipitate in 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 them 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.*[105]

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 wakes up 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 it. The mirror thus is not only split between its captivating reflection and its constituent

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[105] Mladen Dolar, *At First Sight*, in Renata Salecl, Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina – London 1996, p. 136.

reality; it is also split between a seemingly 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-Sixties: i.e. 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 where before 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 side, gaze, in a more qualitative manner, is also that impossible threshold that blurs the homeliness of recognition from 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 be overlapped.

4.2. 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. 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 Seventies, as it is in Baudry and Metz, will not move significantly beyond the argument that reduces Imaginary as a byproduct caused by the symbolic. According to this early understanding of Lacan a human being is doomed to be fascinated by 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 the phallic identification, where the visual comes to play a

role *only* as a stand-in of the signifier chain. Miller claims that in order to have a specificity of the domain of the visual – what Lacan will do with the concept of gaze starting from 1962 – it is preliminary necessary to question a widespread and very common understanding of visual *perception* modeled on the St Thomas Aquinas' *adequatio rei et intellectus* epistemological principle.[106]

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* who has to transcend itself and makes a visual synthesis of the various events of the world occurring in his presence. It is him who directs the encounter with the perceived object, but at the same time he does not decide whether what he perceived corresponds to reality or not. Perception can be full of contradictions, mistakes, traps: there are hallucinations, uncertainties, visual tricks etc. Sometimes a person can be brought even to believe that what he perceived does not exist according to a large part of fellow-perceivers. Perception in fact is always over-determined by a *norm*. If what a perceiver sees is believed to be not existent by the large majority of the other perceivers, it means that what he had seen is simply wrong. A good perception is defined successful only when the *percipiens* can adequate his experience to the *perceptum*: the latter is an "in-itself" that does not have the possibilities to transcend 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 etc.) it best represents the point of measurement according to which it can be regulated the success of the act. The main consequence is the emergence in visual perception of a normative problem: who decides whether the perception did occur with success 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?

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[106] Jacques-Alain Miller, *Dall'Immagine allo sguardo*, in Scuola Europea di Psicoanalisi – Sezione Italiana, *Immagini e sguardi nell'esperienza analitica*, cit., p. 254-255.

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. In front of a person who suffers from hallucinations, the psychologist/sychiatrist tries to bring him back to reasonableness 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 seem 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 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.*[107]

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[107] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London 2006, p. 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 usually the encounter between the spectator and the screen 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 etc.), 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 form 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 taken into primary considerations. It is also an appropriative model: the active pole tries to *posses* the object in question following a model of accumulation of knowledge as if it were a matter of property of commodities. When Lacan introduced the concept of gaze, he did not intend so much to reverse the relation and put the agency on the side of the object, but rather to profoundly re-think *what* an object is and how to think the form of the correlation subject-object of perception. What, starting from the early Sixties, 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.[108] Gaze is different than a look because it does not come from an eye and like an arrow is launched in the direction of an object; it is rather a way in order to think the totality of the *space* where vision occurs. It addresses a dimension of the 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 gaze would be in fact *a mode of appearance of vision irreducible to experiential clarity*. We will see that 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." At first 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 form a point to another. If a look is always modeled on the transitive verbs and always goes from a point to another; 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 etc. 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 figured in a neutral space; it is reluctant to be imaginarized and in such a space there are not concrete appearing objects which directs the propagation of vision. Gaze does not connect two object, *it is an object in itself, intransitively*.

But before moving to a more detailed analysis of Lacan conceptualization of gaze we will see how an internal critique of a linear understanding of vision as a

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[108] It is known Slavoj Žižek formulation that *object a* (or rather phantasy, which is the subjective mode of relation toward *object a*) is Lacan's continuation of Kant's critical project in determining the transcendental conditions of desire independently from the concrete and contingent appearance of a specific object of desire.

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 in Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and Invisible*. These three intermediate passages will lead us to better articulate the separation between the vision as an occurrence in an Imaginarizable space and the radical heterogeneity of the gaze where vision is no more seen, but thought.

4.3. 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 the 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*.[109] 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 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 the "see" and "be seen"). The result is a multiplication of lines that, when brought to the extreme of reciprocal overlapping, makes this model of vision to be emptied out 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 grip precisely at the peak of its realization.

But let us briefly recall the subject of the painting and Foucualt's main argument. The story of the *Las Meninas* is well-known: Velázquez painted it in 1656 during one of the most prosperous time in the history of Spain; it is a famous example of

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[109] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Routledge, London – New York 1989, pp. 3-18.

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 are shown from the back, while the front is precluded from our vision. Aside of the painter caught in the moment of working, there are also other characters depicted at very center of the stage, mostly identifiable as members of the Spanish court. Among them in the foreground there 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 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 the interpretation of Lacan. Consistent with an apparent idea of total transparency underlying the painting, Velázquez is not only showing the "backstage" of the work, but 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 the frame.

It is known how Deleuze developed the theory of the non-rapport between the articulable and the visible in Foucault[110]: the two orders would be impossible to reduce 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 signifier-ized and aimed at underlining the internal relations as in the several lines that cut the space of the painting and distributes the elements according to different places (divided between see and be seen, active and passive). But there is also another plane not constructed through vectors but through an intransitive and material propagation of lightness. We will see that the interpretation of Foucault will move along these two directions that also represent the two different declinations of the visual that we want to analyze: gaze as an heterogeneous element in the picture, and gaze as an intransitive scopic drive.

Foucault main argument is rather crucial and remind very closely the problem already analyzed regarding in the second chapter regarding the signifier chain: in every representation the foundational element is structurally lacking. The typical example is the blind spot implied in every constitution of the visual field, whose exemplification in a painting could be the position of a real-existing painter who performed 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 center 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 unto the other; they are literally overlapping in the same place. It is a prefect

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[110] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis – London 1988, pp. 47-69.

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," 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 an immanentization of invisibility: it does not treat invisibility as an impossible referent reluctant to be 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 on the door on the back, the Little Princess etc.) looks directly at a point occupied at the center 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 void visibility that cannot be appropriated by anyone, not even by the spectator who is not reflected in it. It is interesting here to note 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 of *forcing*. The characters look effectively what in the painting is put behind their back: the active subject and the passive object 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 the extreme consequences, as if he were stretching a line almost until a point when it is about to break.

But Foucault more than underlining the almost topological self-reflexive movement of the visual lines 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 the 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)."[111] He thus underlines the different vertical levels of positionality and the way they get 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."[112] 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 unto the other (the self-reflexive circle could go on forever at this regard) but also, and somehow crucially, how all the invisibilities that founds the visible are part 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.*[113]

Instead of trying to construct a dialectic of *suture* according to which there is a

[111] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, cit., p. 16.
[112] *Idem*, p. 17.
[113] *Idem*, p. 18.

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 con-participation to the same basic invisibility which is ineliminable in every strategies of visualization: "the profound invisibility of what one sees" is *inseparable* "from the invisibility of the person seeing." According to Foucault thus visibility and invisibility 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 won't be a surprise then to find a similar phenomenological tone in a part of the chapter where Foucault passes form 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.[114]

It is striking how in this passage Foucault discarded the clothes of the logical analyst of the structural positions in order to turn to the *materiality of light*. The light creates in this "spiral shell" on one side 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 side 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 "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."[115] And he underlines how such a light seems to caress evenly the contours of every objects 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, like there is no signifying relation involved. While the vectorial lines were creating multiple cuts and reversals between the elements, the lights 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 to oppose 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

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[114] *Idem*, p. 12.
[115] Dario Melegari, "Il mormorio e la carne. Un confronto tra Merleau-Ponty e Foucault su visibile, linguaggio e storia," in *Mnemosyne*, n. 1, vol. 1, 2005.

negativity/positivity. If we consider for example that visibility in its pure form (such as a 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 form the point of view of a supposed origin of vision where visibility and invisibility are indistinguishable (in a not dissimulated form of metaphysic 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*. Gaze at this regard will represent an unsubstantial unbalance, impossible to emerge at the level of the discrete objects of the Imaginary, of the relation of visibility/invisibility. Or in other words, an embodiment of what in the Foucaldian "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 the 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 makes visualization of it always problematic.

4.4. Merleau-Ponty and the corporeal dimension of vision

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of the visual 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 the Seminar XI in 1964, who when introducing the concept of *gaze,* will refer extensively to Merleau-Ponty development of the topic. The problem relies on the nature of the visual as different (and in some sense opposite) to the empiricist model of vision modeled

on the "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."[116] 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" 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 study the philosophical issues related to perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty 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"[117] 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 insight in order to derive the concept of 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 on concept will nevertheless be very different than what Lacan developed in his seminar in 1964. The French phenomenologist started with a conviction: vision is not a problem of linear trajectories or elements' positions; 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 what are the organs involved. Visual perception do not relate only to the physiological stimuli of the organs in charge. Both Lacan and Merleau-Ponty at this regard are clear and they do share a same view, as

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[116] Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 1964* (edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Nicole Sheridan), W. W. Norton & Co., New York – London 1978, p. 94.
[117] *Idem*, p. 71.

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.[118]

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 single points of view from where one could be looked at, as numerous as they may be. We shouldn't therefore think about an exposure such as the one of being in a arena with thousands of eyes pointing at us. Sciacchitano gives at this regard a zoological example: the 80% of the planet biomass is constituted by plankton (prawn larvae, polyps, jellyfishes, worms etc.). 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.[119] 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. The Merleau-Pontian idea of vision is not very far from this example. It is a vision that, more than with a connective line, it would be better visualized with a liquid that passes through a human being, it envelops it, it embraces it, it fills every small angles and voids: "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."[120]

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[118] *Idem*, p. 72.
[119] Antonello Sciacchitano, *Lo sguardo o spazio scopico*, www.sciacchitano.it/Oggetti/Menu%20oggettuale/sguardo.html (last visit, 21 December 2011)
[120] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, cit., p. 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 human beings. It is in such a *living space* that 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 visibile 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.'*[121]

The con-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 fiercest and strongest critique of an idea of visuality addressed in the realm of immaterial relations as it is 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 than any other body, and therefore becomes matter and flesh. Every understanding of the vision as a negative withdrawal is abandoned for a universality of sensation where vision is just one among the

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[121] *Idem,* pp. 137-138.

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 the late Merleau-Ponty, but nevertheless the points of conjunction are striking, given that a theory of gaze in psychoanalysis would have not 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 spaces.

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 the visual occurrence, are not organs or agencies that use vision from an active position: they are rather used by vision. They are incarnation of a vision that precede and determine them.

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

Lacan was interested in an interpretation of Velázquez painting in a very peculiar way. His starting point is in fact sufficiently *ad absurdum* to instill enough doubts whether the very objective of this series of seminar sessions, three from 11, 18 and 25 May 1966, were not on the contrary aiming at something that went much further than simply what is at stake in a painting that – as we saw – has already engendered enough interpretations to easily get lost. His primary *boutade* can be condensed in a simple formula: the Kings and the Queens are not the subject of the painting. What seems to be an almost taken-for-granted element in the long history of interpretation of this painting is quickly discarded by Lacan. 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 not testimonies of the

fact the 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 etc.: the reasons brought forward by Lacan are far from convincing (also because inconsistent between them, as in the famous Freud's story of the "borrowed kettle"), but it should not strike us as a problem, given that what is at stake in this interpretation is definitely not its historical accuracy but its dimension of theoretical truth.

The real object of this interpretation is in fact another one: the *window*.

> *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).*[122]

The window, very closely to the Merleau-Pontian idea of a material vision, is the pure pre-subjective vision before it gets concretized in series of objects and relations. It is the pure condition of possibility of the event of vision like the opening of the eye lids, without any specific occurrences have yet taken place. Lacan takes the terminology from an analysis of perspective developed in the previous lectures of the seminar. The subject of vision would be in fact split between the signifiers and the interstitial space between them (which would stand as the variable *a*). The window, the opening of the possibility of vision would get 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 S1 – S2) individuates the place of the subjects 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) indicate the pre-existence of

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[122] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIII. The Object of Psychoanalysis 1965-1966* (unpublished), lecture of 11 May 1966.

vision in regard to the projected space. 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 would represent the S1 and the S2 of the split subject. Between them the Infanta Margarita as the *object a* as what orientate 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 for its indecidability between being passive and active; it is a register that is characterized for its overlapping of activity and passivity as if they were expression of the same concept. At 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 treaty 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.*[123]

When libinal 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*. Lacan therefore takes three of the characters of the paintings in order to construct the path of drive in vision. The painter would represent the first moment, when the look is attracted by the object: he leaves the paintbrush, take 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 images that the little girl would say "let me see!" directed toward us (but in fact thinking about what is on the other

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[123] Eric Laurent, *Immagini e sguardi in psicoanalisi*, in Scuola Europea di Psicoanalisi – Sezione Italiana, *Immagini e sguardi nell'esperienza analitica*, cit., p. 35.

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 regard the S2, the second Velázquez, who is at the door; Lacan images that he is about to leave the room. He saw it already, he saw it too much, "I'm leaving you." The three movement therefore would stand as the circular path of drive in the scopic field. Drive does not aim at satisfying itself achieving its goal; it is meant to remain structurally partial. That is why paradoxically its satisfaction morphs into the impossibility to reach it, or – which is the other side of the same coin – its partiality becomes a form of paradoxical satisfaction. The movement is circular, as it is closed in itself. The problem is the point of emergence of the circular path of drive, which is exactly the function of *a*: the window. And here Lacan made another *coup de theater*:

> *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.[124]*

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. Differently than Foucault the diagonlization does not occur because of the dialectic between invisibility and visibility, but because the *object-ion caused* by the remainder: *a*. A pure specular dialectic will always remain close in itself even at the visual level. The possibility to attract the gaze is created by the appearance of stain: exactly like the stain that Alice see in the mirror at the beginning of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Lacan used at 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

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[124] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIII. The Object of Psychoanalysis 1965-1966* (unpublished), lecture of 11 May 1966.

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 to remain on the background. The problem is the dissolution of vision in an interplay of signifier and the underestimation of a property of vision which is on the register of the *intransitivity* and of its heterogeneity to geometral optic.

The Freudian reference can at this regard clear many misunderstanding. In the occurrence of a traumatic event, according to Freud, the affect that it was connected to it 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* it indicates that there is a *representative* of representation that overlap its representative content with its *energetic* and *libidinal quantity*. We have therefore two dimension, a linguistic-qualitative one given by the representation content, but also a quantitative and libidinal one which is embodied by the somatic appearance of the repression. We should thus highlights the *economical* register of this term that somehow get lost with the translation of *repräsentanz* as representative that it almost inevitably indicates a register of the double, of specularity and representation. Freud defined "representative" as a desiring *impulse*. Jacques-Alain Miller even went that far in claiming that "*obecjt a* is the Lacanian equivalent of the Freudian *Vorstellungs-repräsentanz.*"[125]

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 *drive* involved in the field of vision. The painting of a painting functions as a *trap* for the look, as literally a *cause of the visual desire*. If we think as 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.

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[125] Jacques-Alain Miller, "Silet," in *La Psicoanalisi*, n. 23, Astrolabio, Roma 1998, pp. 161.

4.5. How not to be tricked by the Zeuxis and Parrhasios story

The passage from a mirror to a screen is the shift from vision as 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. It is the classical tale of the 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, Parrahsios won over him for having painted 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 gaze 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 on 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 the vision, does satisfy, so to speak, the gaze."[126] 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 Real void. A visual subject of desire does not ask to be given to him the object of his need, but the object of his scopic desire, which, as it is always in Lacan regarding desire, emerges precisely on the background of an impossible satisfaction. Lacan in fact reminds 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."[127]

This dimension of deceiving is what can makes us isolate the function of the

[126] Matteo Bonazzi, *Scrivere la contingenza. Esperienza, linguaggio, scrittura in Jacques Lacan*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2009, pp. 111 – 112.
[127] Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 1964*, cit., p. 112.

signifier in the scopic field. It is because of the constant involvement of the cut of the Two that the frame that the mirror believes can be perfectly reflectable, starts on the contrary to *refract* and to introduce an element of diagonalizition in the visual. The dimension of the Two is not exclusive of language, it over-determines any form of relation also within vision and perception, given that according to Lacan there is not natural biology outside of the domain of the signifier. The effect of *trompe l'œil* has somehow a structural necessity at this regard in making the subject to 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. Joan Copjec articulated as follow:

> *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.[128]*

With a word-play we could say that the point of this account is the *point*. But it is also its problem. The dialectic is not so much between transcendence and immanence as Joan Copjec further on seems to believe. The fact that the signifier conceals something and that a subject of desire is therefore emerging from the unsusbtantial interstitial space between the signifiers is only one side of the coin. The other would be at this regard to not re-inscribe this very space (in the structure; i.e. the non-substantial account of Being) in *the space* (the visual field) with the risk of an illegitimate re-ontologization. Joan Copjec somehow admits it when she claims that "language's opacity is taken as the very *cause* of the

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[128] Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan," in *October*, vol. 49, Summer 1989, p. 69.

subject's being, its desire."[129] The subject became the effect of the very impossibility to see the *whole* in the mirror and therefore it 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 from that, that the subject is "the *effect of the impossibility* [my emphasis] of seeing what is lacking in the representation"[130]? The short-circuit between the impossibility of being to the being of impossibility can be a dangerous one, especially because it ends up in placing *in the Real* the eternal problem of the foundation of the signifier chain. Despite the incalculable richness that the concept of gaze can still attain regarding an analysis of the visible that tends to inevitably falling back to a sort of abstract universality, we should be extremely careful in resolving the problem of the subject of desire through the instituent character of *object a*. Otherwise the act of deceiving made possible by the *object a* becomes the way through which a certain *reassurance* that we throw out of the window as imaginary is welcomed back at the door under the guise of the Real.

In order to de-substantialize the concept of *a* we have to, first of all, 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 at us cannot be treated as literal appearances of the object; they are rather subjective manifestation of anxiety, i.e. they are the affect that reveals in a rather indirect way the inconsistency of the One of the imaginary. At this regard, even though it might seem paradoxical, *gaze can't 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, and not as a subjective form of appearance of anxiety as it should be. In the very moment when gaze can be detected as a visual occurrence, it does inevitably fall back to a certain form of imaginarization which is by definition doomed to be haunted by the dialectic of specularity. The *gaze* is the rather paradoxical phenomenon of an occurrence that while happening in the visual field it does not have a visual appearance, that is why is so reluctant to be treated through

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[129] *Ibidem*.
[130] *Idem*, p. 70.

examples; because every one of them will entail, as much as abstract they could be, a minimal form of imaginarization.

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 as structurally un-imaginarizable. A good example of this point is given when Lacan mention 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.[131]*

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 reasons why the application of the concept of gaze into film analysis risks inevitably to lose 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 imaginarization of it, its status should be left in an almost ineffable description, according to which its

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[131] Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 1964*, cit., p. 84.

materialization would be always not only partial, but also defective if confronted to its higher degree of being.

4.6. 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 style of argumentation where the constant use of external references somehow marked its mode of writing; making him being considered the perfect incarnation of a "philosophy of exemplifications." But nothing in fact would be more far from true. Bruno Bosteels recently accurately reconstructed the different shifts and changes in Žižek's work regarding the development of the concept of "act" (but we can extended this argument to any concept developed by Žižek). While on one hand it would seems that his work would constantly go in circle, repeating over and over again the same examples, and sticking with an indomitable stubbornness to a somehow narrow set of concepts; he in fact makes this concepts undergoing a small, even though not insignificant, theoretical changes. This process happens through time along his many and frequent publications, but also through the space of the same volume, where the same concept is used in different and sometimes even conflicting manner. Far from being the sign of a sort of theoretical pluralism, where a concept would be recognized for its slipping and multiple possibility of meaning, Žižek combines this rhetorical strategy with the "dogmatic stopping point" according to which all the manifestation of the same concepts are precisely *not* contradictory. Bosteels claims regarding the concept of act that "we are expected to make sense of the opposing intonations of the act all at once and simultaneously."[132] The multiplicity and contradictory manifestations of the same concept are performatively knotted together by the declaration of doctrinal consistency.

Were we to take away these references to Hegel or Lacan, Žižek's

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[132] Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism*, Verso, London – New York 2011, p. 194.

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.[133]

The different declinations of the same concept are therefore dogmatically unified by their reference to the same point of stopping. Even though it would not be 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 to find a center of orientation that despite its being void – i.e. not positively articulable – it is precisely *what makes a difference*. It is not a coincidence that Žižek used this rhetorical strategy also in order to tackle the concept of *object a* or 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.

This also explains why Lacan refers to the Freudian idea of "partial object" in order to conceptualize the *gaze*. It cannot in fact being reduced to a certain categorical representation, but it destined to be detected in *partial* manifestation. The true theoretical deadlock is why these different concrete manifestations appear themselves as *parts* and not as plural and different concrete "things" of the world; or in other words, why are these manifestations not several individuated elements in the imaginary, but did they get *partial-ized* and thus they indicate a register reluctant to be imaginarized?

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[133] *Ibidem.*

An *Object a* such as gaze, is defined for being a non-categorical object. That means that representations of it do exist, but they are many and they are not equivalent between them.[134] They do not constitute a set that can become an element of another set with the totality of its representations. As it was stated by Freud: "partial drives […] are not without objects, but those objects do not necessarily converge into a single object."[135] 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 positionalities. The problem is thus not how to "make One" out of them, something which would make us fall back either to its Imaginarization or to its transcendentalization as an unfathomable outside. Psychoanalysis at this regard do not go in either one of these direction, but it rather tries to elaborate a path of *formalization*, that would entail the possibility to elaborate a transmissible knowledge out it.

Psychoanalysis thus, 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 it, where a subject tries to accommodate the impossible universality of the mode through which he entertains his phantasy with it; or whether it would be possible to risk the path of a possible formalization of this encounter; knowing that formal knowledge need to be re-thought and re-invented in order to make this act of transmission possible. Cinema until now, or any practice of production of images, took the first path, trying to evoke and to incarnate a gaze in the singularity of its own evental relationship with the object. But what if images would not try to incarnate the solution of the encounter with an object, but rather to activate a more profound cut? Where any possibility for the imaginary to be re-sutured after the appearance of the *object a* would be discarded as unacceptable? What if the appearance of the gaze that also cinema makes possible would engender a practice of constitution of a new form of transmissible knowledge where the radical singularity of the object would be

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[134] Antonello Sciacchitano, *Scienza come Isteria. Il soggetto della scienza da Cartesio a Freud e la questione dell'infinito*, Campanotto Editore, Pasian di Prato (UD) 2005.
[135] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (1916-1917)*, in Id., *Freud – Complete Works*, cit., p. 3395.

taken as an opportunity and not as a base for a possible solution? What if a new relation between images and science would still be possible?

4.7. The Three Gazes

How can cinema deal with the asymmetrical intrusion of the gaze that objects the unifying operation of the One on 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 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 gaze to an intruder that breaks the equilibrium of the frame and eventually puts the spectator in a position of anxiety. It is a widespread understanding of gaze, for example in film studies when the element of intrusion is 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 the concretely existing objects as a correlate of desire. Gaze in fact *is not* another *point* inhabiting the visual space.

Secondly gaze can function as a trajectory of the *scopic desire*. We saw this definition of 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 in the libidinal economy as a "force" that makes the Newtonian abstract space of visual perception to be morphed into a field of intensities. As in topology where a figure can be stretched and folded as long as it is not cut, here vision ceases to be an arrow as in geometral optics, it does not connect anymore two points in a Euclidean space, but it rather starts to define a qualitative curvature and fold of space as a whole. We also have to remember that gaze is one of the figures through which Lacan addresses the

particular logic of drive: a "force" that is defined by not having a terminal point where to end. A desiring energy that does not seek any achievement. It does not have any aim or goal that it is not 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, starts to move madly over itself without ever finding an end where to conclude its journey. But in a non-Euclidean space, in order to visualize what we understand as drive it can become 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 in some sort of biological transparency as it is with the term *jouissance*, or enjoyment. Despite having an evident clinical effectiveness, this term catches only a part of the problem and risks to reduce the concept of gaze or *object (a)* to some sort of psychological evidence of the kind of a metaphysics of presence. 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 not be different than any other lived experience of visual hallucination or inconsistency of the visual experience. But inconsistencies of visual senses (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 gaze were only limited to an inner psychological or bodily experience of death drive, or to empirical inconsistencies of the senses, there would not be any reason to reserve to this concept any kind of privilege in describing the Real.

Therefore it is important to move the understanding of the concept of gaze to a further stage: a way that keeps some of the insights given by the idea of 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

visual field, making it impossible to be Imaginarized as in the experience of human vision. Non-Euclidean geometries starting from the XIX Century proposed a different formalization of space not indebted neither to the abstractedness of Newtonian space connected with experience nor to the pure intuition of space of 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 to pass through the eyes. The anti-susbstantialist 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 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 Reimann geometry at the beginning of the XX Century almost fifty years after his death became a fundamental brick in order for Einstein to built 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 could be. Not in the way it was developed in the Seventies along the lines of the division between Imaginary and Symbolic; and not even as a way in order to analyze a filmic text to find object-gaze as an heterogeneous element with a psychoanalysis (but it is in fact nothing more than psychology) applied on 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 wider entity. It can express itself as Imaginary when it is constituted by discrete object and

when the relations between those objects are based on the geometral optics of activity and passivity. But there is a dimension of it that is highly counter-intuitive and goes much further not referring to the eyes as phenomenological correlate of the experience of vision.

4.8. A Vision of the Universal

Gaze as an intruder in the filmic text (and the correlate affect of anxiety eventually produced in the spectator) and gaze as subjective experience of scopic *jouissance* are two different modalities through which the consistency of the visual field as geometral optics undergoes a cut. In the correlation of subject and object of vision, in the first case the cut concerns the object (for example the filmic text), in the second case it concerns the experience of the subject involved (the scopic desire). But what Lacan understood was that those two moments are intertwined together (or knotted as Lacan would say) in a third one: 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 in order to deal with this third register, the visual space not as it is perceived, but as Real? Non-Euclidean geometries exemplify a way in order 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 in order to deal with the emergence of the cut of the gaze within the limits of the field of 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 in order, at least if not to resolve, to address the issue of the relation between singularity as what pertains to a single unconscious, and universality as what pertains to knowledge in its general

transmissibility.[136] The Imaginary visual field cannot but regard the particularity of the different and not exchangeable points of view: we see from only *one* point of view different for each and every one of us and dependent by specific positions 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 the individual are affirmed. But if, as it is proved by many achievements of non-Euclidean geometries in the XIX and XX 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 not related to experience (and therefore particularity) but rather to thought (and therefore universality).

Psychoanalysis at this regard, if it is not reduced to mere psychology (i.e. a practice of 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.

A symptom, i.e. 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 a knowledge is transmitted without the participation of the subject but through the subjection of the subject). Psychoanalysis serves several purposes: intervening in this point of

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[136] An example of Lacan's research on the transmissibility of the analytical knowledge was the elaboration of the concept of *passe*: the procedure of (self) authorization 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'Ecole*, in Id., *Autres Écrits*, Seuil, Paris 2001.

emergence in order to produce increasingly new unconscious material; morphologically manipulating this symptom in order to make it more sustainable by 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 relate to each and everyone. Rendering what is bodily inscribed universally transmittable might sounds as 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 unconscious a point of unsurpassable singularity? Or is it possible to morph 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 be overlapped 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 the narcissistic image illusionary provided 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 say thus 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 at the level of a thought?

What is extremely interesting when dealing with the formalization of space given by Gauss or Riemann is that it is not at all a reduction of the concreteness of space to the level of aerial and intellectual mathematical formula. What Lacan showed us through the reflection on the visual between the register 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 arrived to such a shattering conclusion: what is the most far 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 mathematical formalization of space through topology, intrinsic geometry, *n*-dimensional spaces that we come close to a possible universalizable, not to mention faithful to the Real, dimension of space. At this regard 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, the abstractedness is on the former, while the realist option relies on the latter. 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, it can in any case became the door through which initiate a practice of counter-intuitive abandonment of the geometral optics of the Imaginary in order to start to approach space for what it really is: something way larger than what spontaneous perception made us believe it to be.

4.9. Cinema and the Machine

The question now becomes inevitable: which role can cinema play in an understanding of space, that through the opening-up of the gaze, became something way larger than what human visual perception is used to experience? Is cinema and visual art in general destined to be enclosed in the strict boundaries of the Imaginary? Would it be possible for the movement-images to emancipate themselves from being the correlate of human experience of space? Or is cinema only a practice in order to domesticate and suture the gaze to the narrow limits of the screen?

On one hand the answer would be 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*,[137] i.e. intended to be framed by the relation with the phantasy of the spectator: therefore by his/her scopic desire, by his/her enjoyment of vision. 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 makes the eye of the spectator to be trapped by what is happening on the screen. As with *Alice,* the spectator has to be driven by "THAT bit" that wakes the curiosity and cultivates the desire to unfold the film on the screen until the very end. But this desire is opposed by an antagonistic movement: the fact that it has a very specific place of localization, which is enclosed in the few meters (or less) that define the boundaries of the screen (be it a television, a movie theater, a 3-D Imax or a cell phone). The Lacanian *object (a)* of the gaze with its impossible localization and its libidinal infinite trajectory finds at the end a place to rest in the screen. The drive ends in a goal. The opaqueness became transparency. The screen became a mirror (with the effects of ideological interpellation analyzed by Baudry). The *object (a)* became a really existing object of a world. Is therefore the fate of cinema regarding "the visual" sealed?

We shouldn't jump too fast to such a conclusion. Jacques Rancière for example underlined with a very penetrating argument[138] 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

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[137] I borrow this definition from Andrea Bellavita, "Il corpo in frammenti del cinema," in *La Psicoanalisi : studi internazionali del campo freudiano*, vol. 40, 2006, pp. 108-118.
[138] Jacques Rancière, *La fable cinematographique*, Seuil, Paris 2001, trans. by Emiliano Battista, *Film Fables*, Berg, Oxford – New York 2006.

whom one of the most powerful resources of the cinematographic art relies precisely in this banal but nevertheless crucial technological means: the point of view of the camera is minimally (and ideally) always impossible to be perfectly overlapped with the human eye of the director. Cinema was born with the possibility of a mechanical point of view able to record events of the world from a point of view not occupied by any real existing human being. It is an event of tremendous consequences for the representation and the possibility to think the visual space. Vision is no more exclusively experienced from the eyes of a human being, it can be seen from the point of view of a mechanical and purposeless camera. According to Deleuze[139] this fact alone puts cinema in an advantage point if compared to paintings or other visual arts where the point of view of the work of art cannot but overlaps with the look of the artist. In cinema we have a partial similarity to 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.*[140]

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, cinema signs 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

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[139] Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-mouvement. Cinéma 1*, Les éditions de Minuit, Paris 1983, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, *Cinema 1: the Movement Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986 and Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-temps. Cinéma 2*, Les éditions de Minuit, Paris 1985, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, *Cinema 2: the Time Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989.

[140] Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, cit. p. 2.

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 but be passive. But Rancière moves the analysis from the technical devices to the underlying idea of art implicated that defines the regime of art proper to cinema *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 more 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."[141] Cinema has the power to expropriate the Ego and reduce it to the inert matter of things.

4.10. Deleuze and becoming-passive

In the history of confrontation between activity and passivity, a conflict among 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 opposes to subjugates the former to the prerogatives of representation (i.e. Imaginary). Such a conflict can effectively be rearticulated in the terms of a proper aesthetic quandary. While many theoreticians tried to found the cinematographic art on its proper 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 experiences. The technological possibility for a camera to passively record the pure writing of light settled on the aesthetic novelistic model of the XIX 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

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[141] *Idem*, p. 117.

potentiality in order to accommodate the written scripts derived from the literary tradition. It became an illustration of an Other that ended up subjecting images to its own will. The *mimetic* Aristotelian *fabula* won over the intransitive passivity of the image of modernity. Signification and articulation derived from language took over what Deleuze defines the *sterility* of images, i.e. 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 defined the connection between images aimed at the expression of signification a *sensory-motor schema*, i.e. a rationality that put images in 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 theater is not given by the fact that images are none other than records of light stimuli placed on a material support (i.e. a faithful and not 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 more 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).[142]

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 bounded 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 activity of the director. With a device *in-human* such as the camera, its use as an instrument in order to reproduce faithful reality ends up being *all too human*, in the sense of accommodating the unit of measure of phenomenological visual perception: thus gaze is superimposed once again with the eye and the wound of their split definitely 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 image, i.e. when an image breaks the linguistic link of the filmic articulation and expresses its own inner infinity. With the words of Jean Epstein (also mentioned by Jacques Rancière):

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[142] Jean-François Lyotard, *L'Acinéma*, in *Cinéma: théorie, lectures*, special issue of "La Revue d'Esthétique" (edited by Dominique Noguez), Klincksieck, Paris 1973, trans. in *Wide Angle* (1978), vol. 2, n. 3, pp. 53-59.

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.[143]

Epstein considers cinema against 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. In 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 gaze emerges in the consistency of the visual, sign 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 to be *visible*, it is necessary for the narrative story to be emptied out from within by those moments of pure pictorial breaks.

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[143] Jean Epstein, *Bonjour cinéma*, in Id., *Écrits sur le cinéma*, Seghers, Paris 1974, p. 86.

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 *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, sensory-motor links' articulations and pure optical images, narratives meaning and sterile interruptions are all internalization within the field of movement-images of a wider problem concerning the visual as a whole: what we saw as the split between space as visualizable and space as thought. Nevertheless it seems premature to give credit to Rossellini of 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 the otherwise in-visualizable gaze.

For every act of passivity there is always an act of activity that tries to obliterate it. How in fact would be possible to actively leave room for an expropriating passivity? Is it possible from within a certain filmic poetic, from a certain directing style, to willingly be the 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 the win to the camera without faking the game? It is known how 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 to be won by the machine. Usually Deleuze uses the term subject as a synonym of what we called the Ego, i.e. individual in the field of the Imaginary when the law of the One successfully inscribed itself. 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 expenses 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*

166

obviousness of our needs and occupied positions, attain that empty place where, seized 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.[144]

According to Deleuze thinking in the field of the visual does not mean to artificially elaborate 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 relies precisely on the notion of subject: going against the individual of the Imaginary in order for the impersonal and passive gaze (the true dimension of subjectivity) to emerge.

In the visual field it means that the prerogatives of the subject of vision of the Imaginary has to collapse at the expenses of 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 geometral optics, where vision is an arrow connecting two things in an abstract background needs to be opened to the inert passivity of the in-human camera. In his book on Bacon Deleuze writes that art should not aim at appealing the subject, but rather to perturb its mode of existence. The organization of its body needs to be unsettled, the organs let loose from their function ("the flash 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 expenses of the Ego without ultimately re-inscribing a dissimulated willing from 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 *forçage* comes from within

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[144] Alain Badiou, *Gilles Deleuze: « La clameur de l'Etre »*, Hachette, Paris 1997, trans. by Louise Burchill, *Deleuze: the Clamor of Being*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1999, p. 11.

this very mode of existence? It would seem at this regard that gaze cannot but come from a transcendent outside, leaving cinema to be at best a locus of contingent emergence of it, without having any privilege in being able to evoke it with its own inner resources.

Deleuze at this regard in his analysis of Bergson considered the portrait of hands as a metaphor of the power of montage: the active operation par excellence in cinema production. It is montage that best exposes the duality between the will of the artists in his manipulative handling of images and the autonomous passive recording of the camera. There is therefore a split in the very 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 specific idea of art expressed by cinema the non-rapport between the eye and the gaze in the constitution of the visual field. The eye needs to collapse in order to make room for the emergence of the gaze as much as the hand of montage needs to retain from subjecting the passivity of images to his own will. The solution that Deleuze proposes is a negotiation of the non-rapport between these two opposing principles, a way in order to creatively inhabit their inevitably split. With 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.[145]*

This solution, theoretically elegant as it may be, ends up being not completely satisfactory regarding the fundamental non-rapport that we 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 gaze in visual arts. Its awareness of the deep dialectical

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[145] Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, cit. p. 119.

relation between activity and passivity makes it – as it was effectively developed by Jacques Rancière – a form of art particularly modern. Some episodes in its history reveals 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."[146] Many directors have, as their most stubborn objective, the one of making this surprising passivity to emerge in the texture of the film. But there is little or any doubt that any cinematographic choice, as refined as it may be, will end up well on the surface of a screen. The emergence of 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 those four edges.

What would be therefore 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 Real?

4.11. The visual: a matter of formalization

Cinema, and visual arts in general, can constitute a mode in order to give different forms to the break of the gaze. But because of that they inhabit a contradictory but at the same time extremely interesting terrain where 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

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[146] Piero Spila (ed.), *Il cinema di Jean-Marie Straub e Danièle Huillet. «Quando il verde della terra di nuovo brillerà»*, Bulzoni, Roma 2001.

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 relying 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 it is fully assumed the possibility to know the visual even despite its inaccessibility in the imaginary. In the history of science many aspects of the real have been analyzed and formalized despite the impossibility of their visualization until a point where formalization and visualization became even incompatible between each other (as in the interpretation of Copenhagen in quantum mechanics). The issue of gaze brings the incompatibility of visualization and formalization within the domain of the visual itself. What are the possibilities to know the visual despite its impossibility of being visualized? It is 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 gaze therefore ends up embodying the different paths of formalizing a knowledge out of the incongruence and breaks that characterized the visualization of the Imaginary.

A provisional conclusion could be that psychoanalysis, visual art and sciences are knotted together concerning the problematic of the visual. The visual is split between knowledge and visualization; Imaginary and Real; experience and thought and all those disciplines entertain different relations regarding all those conceptual binomials.

The question to be asked is maybe 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 sublate 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 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, as a consequence of human limitations, that the experience of it would be impossible. 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?

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